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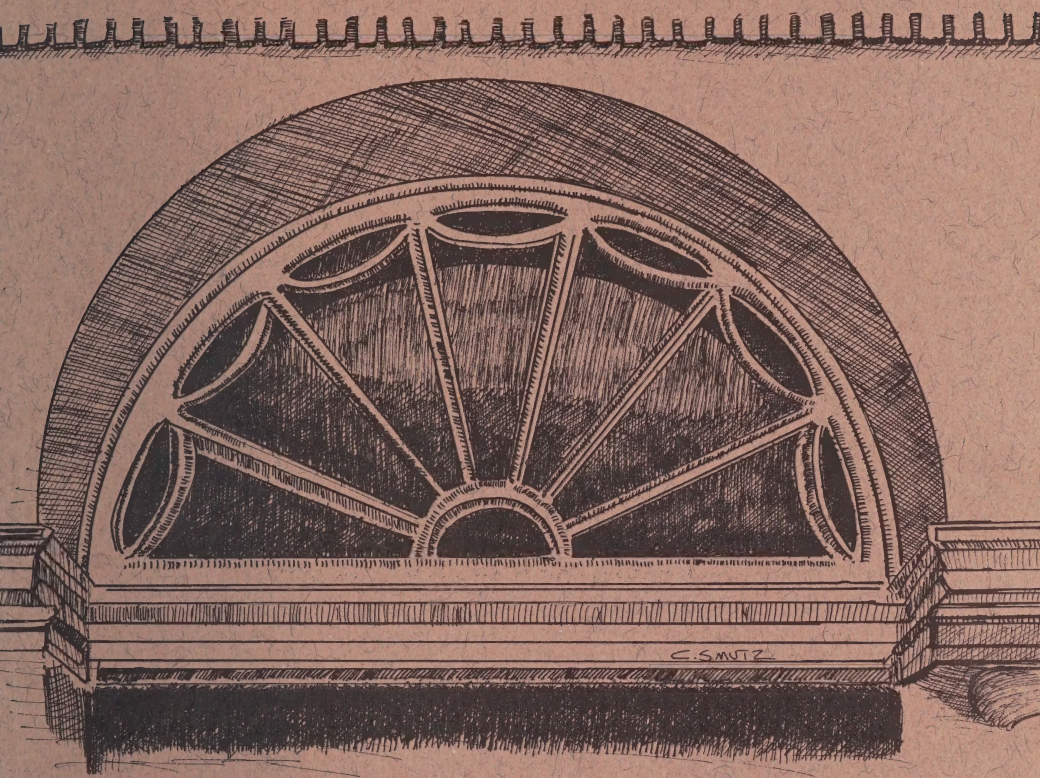

VICTORIA PRESS

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College
1996

This issue is dedicated
to
Thomas E. Gaffigan, Dean Emeritus, Arts and Sciences Division.

Cover drawing by Constance M. Smutz. A window at Fernihurst (Magnolia Building).

Inside cover by Heather Gordon.

VICTORIA PRESS

SECOND ISSUE

A publication of
Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College
340 Victoria Road
Asheville, North Carolina

Editorial Board

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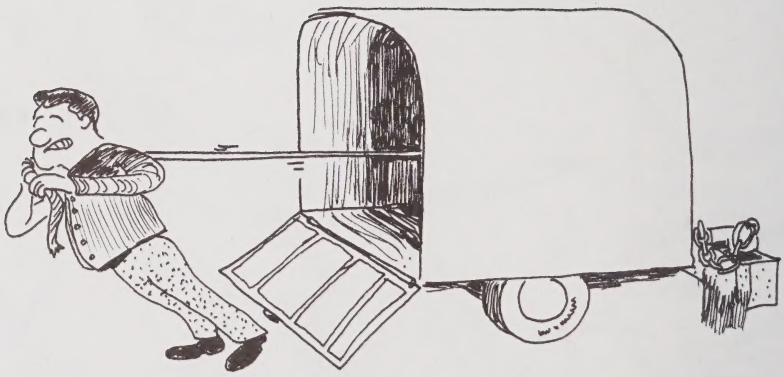
This issue of *Victoria Press* is made possible through the support of K. Ray Bailey,
Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College President
and
a contribution from the Division of Arts and Sciences,
Dr. Andrew Craig, Dean.

Photo by Celia Miles

Deep Memory

Robert Morgan

On the hottest days when ragweeds
wilt and roads weep black and air braids
itself in knots as haze levels
mountains, when the slowest cowbells
stop or even drift backwards, you
can sometimes tear a hunk of new
turf off the bank above the spring
and press your fingers in something
that remembers the last ice age.



Drawings by Richard Croom

The Gentle (and Unappreciated) Art of Cow Wrestling

Roy McGinnis

I am a rusticator. This is a label I've come to terms with. At first I tried to pretend to old timers that I was an old hand but people know. It's something in the way you stand or move or the way you call a duck a chicken by mistake--and they never let you forget. When I am ninety-seven years old there will be living somewhere near me a ninety-eight-year-old codger who will remember and gleefully remind everyone, "He ain't from around here. He's from way out west in Georgia! He's a gol' durn rusticator!" But I can live with that. Perhaps my grandson will be accepted as a local.

Being new to farming means always finding yourself in an adventure. Those fortunate few who still grow up on farms take for granted the joy of country living and lose the sense of adventure. And, having learned about animals and crops from diaperhood, they miss the fun of discovering new latent talents--like cow wrestling.

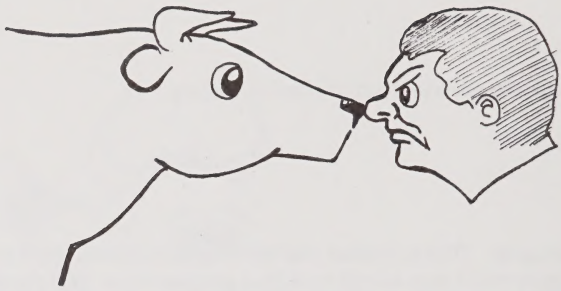
I had been hesitant to get a cow (You never buy a cow; you "get" or "come-by" one. Please take notes. There will be a test later.) because I had seen them, seen how they treated the ones they knew and loved. I had seen their wild eyes when startled by something scary like a new strand of barbed wire fence. More importantly, I had seen the ones who owned the cows. Neither looked safe. But a few months ago I found myself with a tired, old, lame horse who was eating me out of barn and stall. A friend offered to take her off my hands and, while he admitted he might be taking a beating (hah!), he would help me out by trading me a fine Holstein heifer. (This is one example of how one "comes by" a cow.) She was only eighteen months old. I figured she would be manageable, never having developed any motherly instincts. She even came delivered.

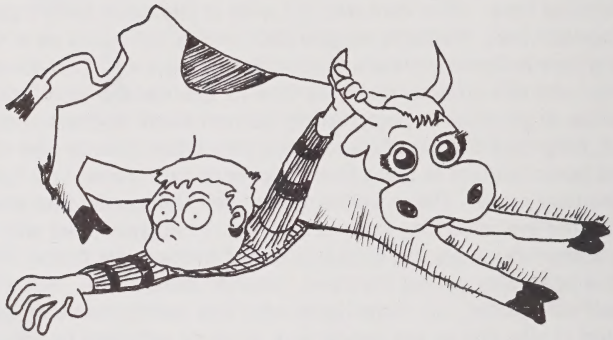
The adventure began when my friend opened the back of the trailer. He handed me the lead rope (There's a good one for you--a lead rope.) and said, "Here's the keys. She might need to be gentled up a bit before you can handle her." But she wouldn't start, just stood there looking at me with those doleful eyes. It took three of us and my dog and a sharp stick to unload the cow. I had had the forethought to put a horse halter on the cow so, I reasoned, she would be tractable. Lesson one: Horse halters are made for horses--cow halters are made for bovine types. Do not confuse the two. Strike one for the rusticator.

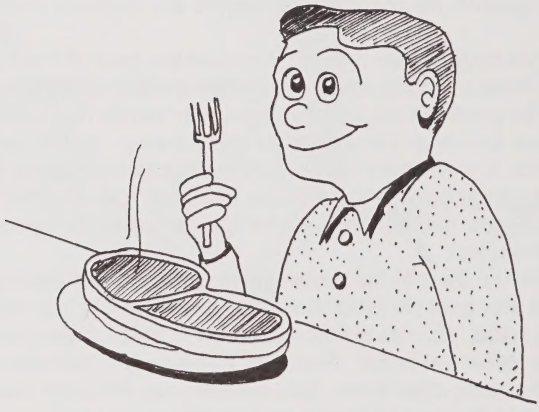
When she left the back of the trailer she must have been looking for the rapture. She jumped, kicked and generally thrashed her horned (yes, to top it off she came armed to the teeth) head. But not to fear--rusticator is here. It was simply a matter of physics. Step one: Halter the beast. Step two: If she resists, pull down and force the ornery heifer into the mud. Step three: Run, brother, run, because cows do not like being pulled down into the mud no matter what cowboys may say.

She headed for the mountain, as irate cows are apt to do.

I headed to the mountain as well because I had my hand wrapped securely around the other end of the rope, as green cowhands are apt to do.







Drawings by Richard Croom

Lesson two: Cows intent on climbing a mountain get somewhat annoyed at having to drag people along with them. They are solitary creatures and prefer to enjoy the climb alone without someone screaming at them words like "ornery #@*" and other cartoon phrases. So I released her and headed back to the house, wondering just how well I would be able to see a dark cow at night on the side of a mountain.

My son came running with a bucket of sweet feed, a rope and a flashlight. We tracked the cow into the thickest brush on the mountain, wandering around unfamiliar woods and skirting cliffs as we went. Finally we found her. She looked at me with her red eyes dancing in the flashlight beams as if to say in her cowy kind of way, "Good luck--Bubba!"

The rope was long enough so that after only an hour or so I was able to take hold of it again, being careful not to pull this time. She had decided to rest at the edge of a cliff, near a large red oak through which ran an ancient strand of barbed wire. I wanted her to rest at the bottom of the cliff with something sharp running through her, but exhaustion often makes me think irrationally. I managed to wrap the rope around the wire, so she had no place to go. She was safe. Tied. Stopped. Lassoed. Down for the count. Out of commission. But I felt she needed to learn a lesson, and I was just the fella that could teach it to her. So, summoning my best Barney Fife swagger, I looked her in the eye. "Little girl," I said, "I'm gonna teach you who's the boss around this place." She looked doubtful.

I was tired. She was tired. I figured she was more tired than I. I was a fool. Lesson three: Cows do not get tired. Their near-wild cousins migrate some ungodly distance across the plains of Africa -- what is it -- something like thirty or forty times a week? What was I thinking? I was thinking I would throw her down. I grabbed her horns and twisted. It had to work. I had seen it work in rodeos. I had seen it work a thousand times on westerns. Hallelujah, it *did* work. It was all just a matter of physics--leverage--higher intellect. Final lesson: Never bulldog a heavy-horned ruminant who is standing uphill from you. It hurts. Bad.

After she got off me, I limped back home. The next day I brought a bucket of feed up to the hungry heifer and led her back home as easily as a kitten. Did I mention that cows are fickle? From that day until her untimely death a few months later, she lived the life of a bovine queen--meals delivered, all the hay she could eat, tied safely to the largest tree on the place where she lived out her days in peace.

Today she sings with the choir invisible. As a symbol of my undying love for her, I have had her remains frozen where they rest safely in my freezer. From time to time I take a piece of the old girl out, and we have dinner together.

Even a city boy knows how to enjoy a good steak dinner.

Photos by Celia Miles

Cold of a Night

Ren Decatur

He was fingering
The straps of an old pair
Of tattered overalls
As he stared vacantly
Out over the hills
Stacked up behind
Themselves until they
Were out of sight

"Gits cold here
Of a night,"
I heard him say,
In a quiet measured tone,
As much to the stacked hills
As to me.

A prolonged probing
Silence shuffled along
Behind that statement.
Meanwhile my eyes searched
Furtively for some
Suggestion of purpose
About its origin.

"Mountain's got its own ways,"
I recalled hearing from some
Remote past; so, I waited
For whatever might follow,
Knowing that he never
Let anything incomplete
Fall out of his mouth.

"That there's my brother,"
He said, again in a deep
Low voice, like soft slow
Thunder rolling across
One of those distant
Stacks of mountains.

He was pointing to a grave
Marker as weathered as the shallow
Furrows in his fallow fields,
Fields overgrown with a broomstraw
Commune which had permanently
Settled squatters' rights.

The map of his face
Showed of old pain,
Newly turned,
Unlike his fields
Whose pain had taken root
Deep beneath the stone-littered
Surfaces, seemingly never
To be upturned again.

"He was kilt,
Shot twiced,
Whilst he was a-makin'
His way home from fishin',"
He told me, as if
I weren't there at all.

"We all knowed who done it,"
He went on,
Squatting,
Talking to the ground
Holding his brother.

"They hain't paid nothin' for it,
Neither," he said, as he
Crushed clods of dirt
Between thick, stained fingers,
"Not yet, no way."

"Hit'll come back around
Though," he said sideways,
Without looking up from
The squat.
"Always does up here."

"Sowin' 'n' reapin'
Is nature's kin in
The mountains; hain't
No gittin' 'round it,"
He prophesied
Matter-of-factly,
Studying the crushed clods.

"Mountain's got its own ways,"
He muttered almost inaudibly,
Jolting my feeble memory
Into a remote past.

As he rose,
His joints cracked like
The cold brittle of winter
Laurel.
Slowly he reached
A deliberate hand
Down to pluck a vagrant
Piece of pithy straw
From the sunken mound
Of his brother's grave:

"Yep, gits cold here,
Of a night."

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Coffee in January

Pat Riviere

I want to drink café latte,
Deep, dark, oily beans
Ground fine as dust
Brewed strong, hot
Blended with frothy sweet cream

Holding the cup in both hands
Careful not to disturb the balance
I feel the warmth penetrate my fingers
Slowly I drink,
Sipping deep and long
Each taste a treat,
An explosion of contrasts:
Sweet, strong, bitter, mellow.
Savoring each mouth full
Warmed from the inside out
As if it were mid-July
And you and I sat arms around each other
Tucked between two mountains
On a car seat going nowhere
Fighting our way through anger and reconciliation,
Honor, desire, and finally truth:
Drinking deep that awful knowledge
We could stay this way forever
And never get enough

Of Teachers I Have Known

Deborah L. Harmon

The third grade boys laughed wildly at something which could be hilarious only to third grade boys. They elbowed and pushed each other about, mussing their once carefully combed hair. The third grade girls paired up and diligently practiced their lines while they smoothed their costumes, hair, and nerves. They all had a glow about them, although the boys' glow came from their incessant roughhousing. "Line up," commanded Mrs. Rolston. The tone in her voice brought all other activities to an immediate halt, and the children scurried obediently to their designated places.

"Shh . . . shh," Mrs. Rolston cautioned with a finger to her lips, as they approached the door of the multi-purpose room at Linden El. Linden El was the affection-laden name for the elementary school they all attended in that small town. They were about to perform for the semiannual PTA meeting. The parents who had carefully delivered them sat in the gray folding chairs listening to news about the planned oral polio vaccination program being presented by the school nurse in her crisp white uniform. They were attentive; this news seemed to have a sense of urgency and they leaned forward collectively to better understand the implication for their children. The turnout was excellent, and the room mothers in the adjacent hall fretted over whether enough refreshments were on hand as they laid the long folding table covered with the traditional white paper cloth.

As the children waited quietly, a wistful thought crossed the mind of the smallest girl in line. "Oh, I wish my mom could be here to see the play tonight." The thought was quickly suppressed; of course, her mom was sick . . . always, and there were four siblings at home all younger than she. "It is almost time to go in," said Mrs. Rolston. "You've worked hard and you're ready. I'm very proud of each of you." She went down the line looking--one by one-- into the scrubbed faces, really looking, and dropping praise on each head as she touched them lovingly.

The large overhead facility lights captured in their metal nets shone harshly as the children hurried behind the makeshift curtain. The name of the play has long been forgotten but the images remain. The scene opened with a community of witches animatedly discussing Halloween. This was, of course, a time when there was no inkling that this childhood ritual was bad for your teeth and health, and perhaps even was a pagan event.

The parent witches were discussing their offsprings' increasing developmental achievements. By all accounts, most of the little witches were making remarkable progress in spell-making, cauldron-tending, and broom-flying. But there was one littlest witch who absolutely couldn't do anything right at all. On cue, the littlest witch made another mad dash across the imaginary stage floor and fell in a heap . . . again. And tears, real tears, dripped down her cheeks. "I'll never be ready for Halloween," she cried. The little witches taunted her and the adults merely shook their heads, frustrated with her ineptness and confounded by her emotion.

The humiliation continued as the littlest witch's spell-making was done in a light, lilting tone--definitely not the screeching quality that had been finely honed by the others. When she dropped rose petals into the bubbling cauldron, even the lead witch felt faint. Oddly, the transition moment has been forgotten, perhaps overshadowed in memory by what was to come. In an accident of some sort, the littlest witch's shiny black cape was caught and torn away revealing the most delicate fairy wings fashioned from a coat hanger covered in ballet tulle. She was a vision in her fairy costume and borrowed pink ballet slippers. The other witches all flew away; goodness knows what they must have thought! The tiny fairy was left alone in the dark woods. However, since this was a children's play, she was rescued by a beautiful fairy princess who arrived with the magic of Glenda a la The Wizard of Oz. And the princess was overjoyed to find her long lost daughter.

Gently pushed from behind the curtain, all the actors joined the fairies and took a bow. The "misunderstood littlest witch" also known as "precious fairy daughter" stepped forward for a bow of her very own. It was a shining moment that lingers sweetly in the grown child's mind.

As this tale was spun, my son listened as I read him the story I had been tapping out at the computer. After saying that the boys should have had a bigger part in the story, he tilted his head and asked, "Is there a moral to this story?"

I suppose there is . . . recognizing, appreciating, and casting students as stars can create a magic that can reveal them in all their splendor.

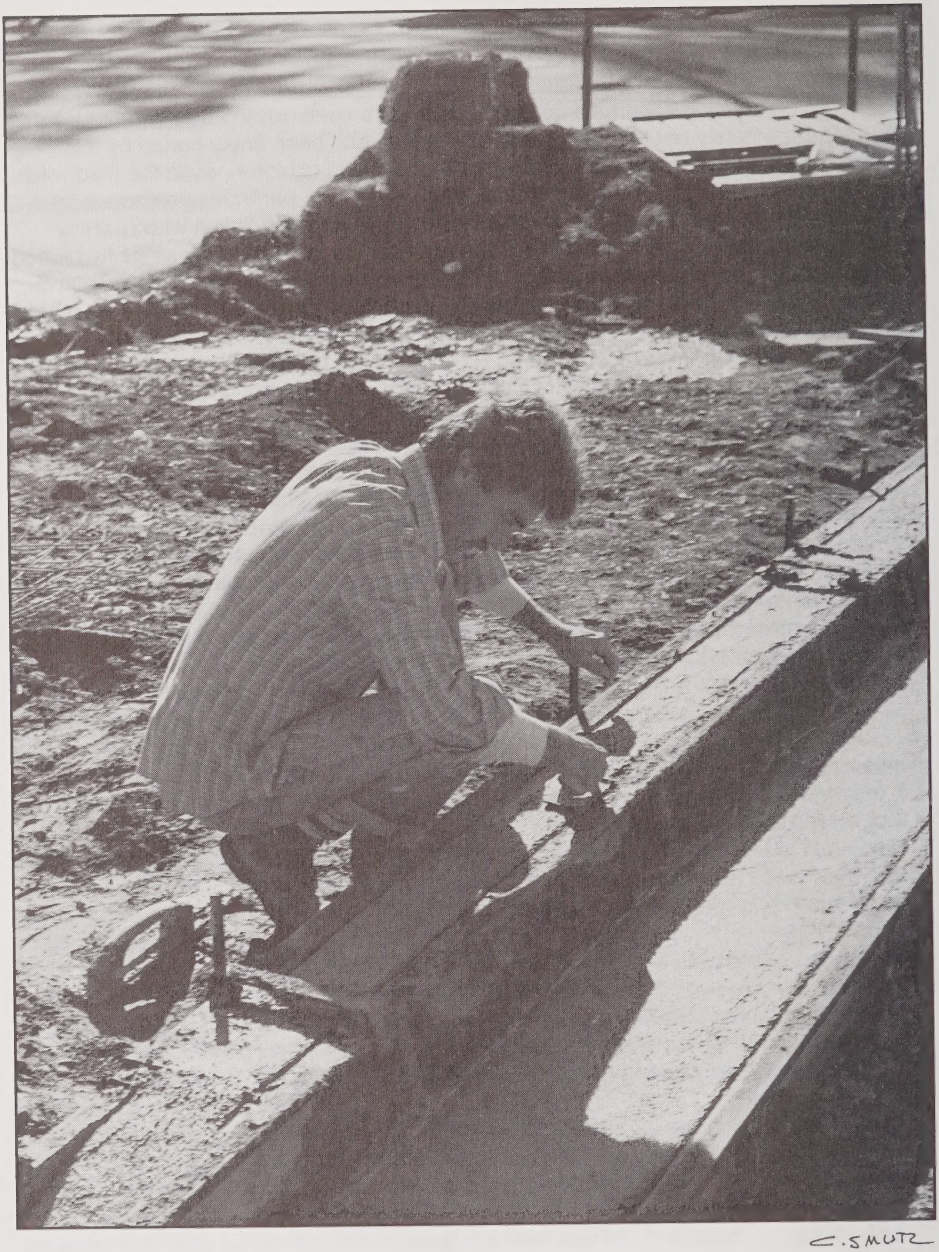


Photo by Constance Smutz

Excellence in Teaching

Sheila Tillman
North Carolina Community College Teacher of the Year 1995

Excellent teaching demands teamwork--correlating the working efforts of faculty and staff, acting with one accord--to produce results greater than the sum of the parts. Academic teamwork means colleagues must be willing to share ideas, to give and accept constructive criticism, and to subordinate personal needs to the needs of students. There is no doubt that such teamwork is evidenced on the A-B Tech campus, and I am proud to be a part of one working team--the Hospitality Education Department.

Success in teaching also requires the proper environment--a place, a surrounding, an established attitude--conducive to experimentation with new teaching techniques. A place where it is acceptable to run the risk of failure in pursuit of learning breakthroughs. It is fortunate that the College embraces academic freedom, providing educators with the opportunity to exercise the innovative and varied teaching methods required to keep learner interest high and to convey to the student the relevance of the curriculum to workplace and personal needs. For me, academic freedom means that I can approach teaching from an exaggerated platform. My teaching success probably stems from my attempts to create a climate with learning as its core, via the use of simulations, demonstrations, skits, cartoons, posters, songs, videotaping, and lots of humor, all in pursuit of a "saturation of the senses"--a total learning immersion. Not a quick fix, the fun approach rather energizes students, encouraging involvement in the learning process. My goal is simple: I want my students to KNOW the information when they leave class, and I will do what it takes.

Teaching and learning are at the very core of our College. When all else is stripped away, student learning is the very reason for its existence.

Effective student learning demands effective teaching. Effective teaching requires spirited teachers--those that touch the soul. During our lifetime, all of us have had teachers with varied teaching styles, but few have had an impact. Why?

In reality, like many skills, the practice of teaching is a proficiency that can be learned, but it is the spirit of delivery and application, coming from within, which separates teachers that have impact from those who quickly fade from memory.

Spirited teachers are those individuals who are "naturals" for the job. They are often referred to by students as caring, concerned, sensitive, open-minded, and enthusiastic. They display consistency of behavior and purpose. They walk, talk, and breathe their commitment to motivating and influencing students to develop personally and academically. They are recognized for maintaining high standards and encouraging student involvement in the learning process. They empower students.

Spirited teachers are motivated by intangibles. Their rewards for doing a good job--a smile, the "Ah ha, I've got it!" or the "Thanks for helping"--are rather simple, but support their passion for teaching.

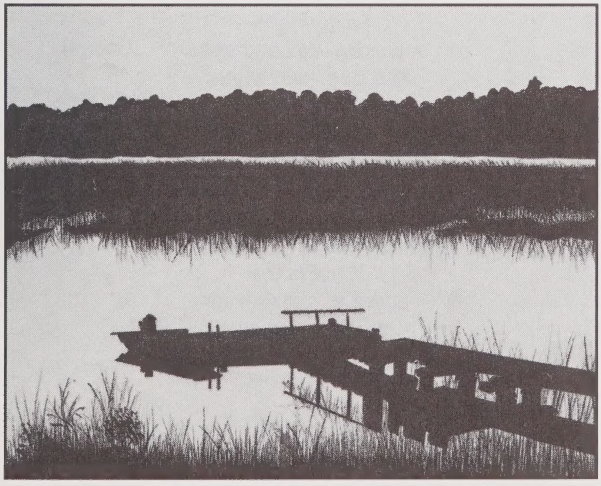
Good teaching requires knowledge, persistence, innovation, and time. Excellent teaching--teaching with spirit--requires teamwork, the proper environment, college support, and most importantly, caring. I believe that a combination of skill, knowledge, and awareness along with a unique sense of empathy for each student--personally, academically, and professionally--provides the vehicle to raise teaching to a higher level.

A-B Tech is indeed fortunate to have a cadre of highly educated and spirited teachers, a core academic team that remains in pursuit of the proper combination of these qualities that inspire their students, honor the college, and contribute to the community as a whole--to produce results greater than the sum of the parts.

The Doves

Roy McGinnis

The doves are sleek and young
gathering for the reaping time
on the singing, wind-whistling wires.
Already their harvest of young is over.
I saw them nesting not two months ago
and now the season of young is over
They join forces to fly into death
through the guns of autumn
Doves are the harbingers, not robins
Behind them was a rainbow.
And I read two promises in the sky.
The dove and the rainbow, now where have I read that before?
A promise of life and death.
Their lives, I think, mean more to me than to them
who have no memories.
I can remember and predict,
worry and fret,
plan and practice to be more.
They can only fly
and know God.



Ink/brush by Shirley McLaughlin

Grandpa's Porch

Will Hooper

Caught in the peeling paint
and the scent of summer air
are evenings of swinging
in the dying day's shadow,
and Grandpa's foot kicking
a blue wooden slat floor
propelling our ceiling-bound craft
and his leg rising above
and just not kicking Grandma--
her sitting rocker-bound and knitting
beneath his feet.

To my left--
amber scraps of sunlight stroll languidly
down the hills of Appalachia
and fall into the cow pasture across the road,
where they momentarily lean against
scattered and slow chewing cows
and spray long thin cow shadows
across the tall grass.

To my right--
a window of darkness.
The bedroom where
twelve children,
thirty-two grandchildren,
thirty-one great-grandchildren,
and sixty-five years were conceived.
That large square in the wall
is just dark when I look inside.
It holds the
scent of summer air
and the mystery
of my soul's descendence.

To the Knight in Shining Armor

Janice Howell

Once upon a time
I longed to be shorter,
To be thinner, to be blonde.
I wished to be for you,
Not me.

But...

Mother's seed formed me,
Living filled me up,
Knowledge chipped away the rough edges.
Although not yet complete,
I stand alone.

And...

Time has polished
The lenses of my eyes.
I see you perched askew your white horse,
Your armor tarnished,
The unprotected places vulnerable.

Hence...

The spell is broken.

Flesh

Roy McGinnis

I once knew a man named O'Gealth
who bought fitness with all of his wealth.
        Since the strength of his heart
        was way off of the chart
he eventually died in good health.

Woodcut by Shirley McLaughlin

Dinosaur

Nancy Dillingham

I first saw him on the Saturday after my fourteenth birthday, but I had heard a lot about him that summer. He had set up an open-air market called Pearl's Poetry Parlor (which I thought was an interesting play on words) where he also cut hair and read poetry over a loud speaker. People said that he used to teach in some college but that now he was as crazy as a loon. (That next school year, whenever the bully of the school wanted to ridicule someone, he called him "Pearlie.")

The proprietor of Pearl's Poetry Parlor was Jeffrey Pearl--his patrons called him "Professor." Prof. Pearl sold everything. My aunt, who was also to be my teacher in the fall when school began, read religiously the newsletter that he put out each week. Besides advertisements for all the merchandise he carried, he also offered services such as poetry critiques.

Since my aunt fancied herself a poet, she clipped the ad, and, early one Saturday morning, we set out for Prof. Pearl's. She had taken me under her wing for the summer since I was to be her pupil in the fall and since my mother was working overtime in the factory in town. She had given me the literature textbook to read, which I went through in one night. I didn't tell her so. I made a great show of reluctance, but I loved all the stories and the poems. She insisted also that I begin to keep a journal, which I did, balking outwardly at the idea. After all, I did have a reputation to maintain--that of a wisecracking tomboy, smart-alecky and self-sufficient. I took great delight in second-guessing my aunt, so I kept one for her and one for me.

My aunt was an old maid--everyone said so, but not to her face. Nonetheless, she was really sensitive about the matter and lectured all of us about it. But she really fit the title, and it was hard not to think of her in those terms. She was also very close with the penny--people said she was so tight she screaked--and wanted to be sure that she got her money's worth. I guess she felt that she could get a crash course in the art of poetry for $1.95 if she took her poems to the professor.

That Saturday morning she stopped by to get me on her way to the market. After lecturing me on the evils I would find there--drunken men and loose women--she told me to look out for some good tomatoes and squash, instructing me completely and lengthily in the art of buying good produce. I sat in the back seat nodding my head, trying to appear only appropriately interested when she looked in the mirror at me. I was really excited and impatient to get there.

After the rather long drive--my aunt was a very careful driver--we passed the homemade sign indicating that Pearl's Poetry Parlor was just ahead. I heard the music and voice before my aunt stopped the car in the parking lot. It was really just an open field with the market in the middle.

We got out, and I inched away as soon as I saw my aunt examining pink, plastic flamingos and began to make my way through the crowd to the front of the market where the professor was cutting hair and reciting to the accompaniment of a record player into a mouth-level microphone rigged up to the back of the barber's chair.

At first glance, the professor looked like a boxer. His head was massive, and he was overweight, but muscular. His hair was greasy, and his dingy white shirt was wet with sweat. I elbowed closer until I was on the front row to his left, my tennis shoe propped against an ornately carved bedstead. I tried to look casual, but his voice excited me. It was mellifluous yet full-bodied, hard yet soft around the edges. When he finished a line, he looked over at me and caught my eye. I lifted one eyebrow in a challenging "Oh, yeah?" and jammed my hands further into my pockets. But I was impressed! His long-lashed, rich brown eyes, despite the red lines, were expressive. The space in which he was working was very small and cluttered, and, when he finished, I felt his breath on my bare arm. He looked at me again, and I shrugged. He smiled and showed strong, even teeth, stained, perhaps, from tobacco. I made my way back into the crowd a little and continued to observe him without him noticing me. He was said to be twenty-eight or thirty, which was old to me, but he looked older, lines already deep in his dark forehead where his greasy, curly hair tumbled now as he bent to concentrate on cutting hair once again. His arms, weather-tanned to where he rolled his sleeves, were big and hairy; his hands, large but beautifully shaped. He reminded me a little, at that moment, of an unkempt Clark Gable.

I made my way to the produce and was assiduously examining tomatoes and squash when my aunt appeared again. "Let's sit down," she said, "until the crowd thins. Then I want you to take my poems to the professor."

As noon approached, the crowd thinned to sparse, and my aunt carefully counted out $1.95 from her small, worn change purse. She handed me a sheaf of poems in a neatly labeled folder along with the money, admonishing me not to lose either.

Again, I made my way to the front. The professor was sweeping hair into a little pile in the corner of the dirt floor. He propped his broom up and sat down in the battered barber's chair. I swaggered forward and thrust the folder and money to him in one gesture. He took them in his big hand.

"These yours?" he asked in his deep voice.

"No, they're my aunt's over there," I said, jerking my thumb over my shoulder, indicating my aunt in one of the rickety chairs at the edge of the arena.

"Come back next Saturday, and I'll have them ready for you," he said.

I nodded and started to walk away.

"Liked my poetry, eh?" he added.

I stopped and spun around defensively, but he was smiling. I walked on.

When I got back to my aunt, she had three or four tomatoes and two or three squash picked out. "Now, Honeybunch, go and get these and we'll leave," she said.

I gritted my teeth and smiled. Now I had to walk all the way back up there and watch him look through me again.

When I got back up to him in his chair, he was drinking a bottle of orange soda. He got up and set his drink down next to the dusty cash register beside the barber tools on the small, makeshift desk. "How about a cold drink?" he said as he rang up the produce, put the change in the drawer, and handed me the tomatoes and squash in a crushed-up bag he fished from a disheveled mound inside the desk.

"No, thanks," I answered coolly.

"Okay, suit yourself," he said and smiled again.

How come I could fool everybody but him I wondered as I made my way to the car where my aunt was waiting.

When we returned the next Saturday, I noticed four children playing with a huge, taffy-colored dog in the field where we parked. Rumor was that the professor had two children of his own and that two more had just wandered in and stayed. As I got out of the car (my aunt having mysteriously decided to pick up her poems herself from the professor), I looked at the children more carefully. They were all very dirty, for it had rained the night before, and they were playing in the mud puddles created in the field by the tire tracks. Their clothes were nondescript and mostly brown now from the mud. I picked out the two that must be his. They were chubby and stout with dark, unruly curls--one boy and one girl. The other two, also one boy and one girl, were skinny as sticks with thin, stringy blond hair.

"What's his name?" I asked as I sidled up to them, indicating the dog.

"Taffy," they answered in unison, looking up from their mud pies.

"Where's your mama?" I asked.

The two curly-headed ones looked at each other for a few minutes, sharing a secret, then continued to play. The other two skinny ones just looked blank as they patted daisies into their cakes. I sat on a rock and petted Taffy.

After a while, one of the stout ones looked up. "My daddy reads palms," he said.

I nodded, looking impressed, leaning forward conspiratorially.

"He read Taffy's paw," the other one giggled.

I laughed and said goodbye as they were getting ready to eat their pies and wandered into the arena and looked around. Sure enough, there was a hand-lettered sign above the cloudy mirror behind the barber's chair. "Palm Reading," it said. I milled around and saw my aunt in a chair poring over her poems. I found my familiar spot beside the bedstead again and listened raptly. He looked up and saw me, smiled, and continued to recite.

When he was finished, he turned in my direction and bowed with a great flourish. I felt my skin begin to redden. I was glad my aunt was oblivious to these goings-on.

On the way home, my aunt wanted to know why I was so quiet. "I'm thinking about my journal," I said. "The Parlor would make a good subject," I persisted. "By the way, what did the professor say about your poems?"

Now it was her turn to redden and squirm a little. "What does he know about poetry, anyway?" she sniffed. "That place is dirty and coarse--no place for womenfolk to be." Subject closed. I knew this was the end of our trips there, but I vowed to myself that I would find a way to go back.

The next Saturday morning when my aunt called on me and wanted me to go with her to the schoolhouse to dust the seats and chalkboard in preparation for the fall opening--she liked to prepare for everything in advance--I feigned illness. She felt of my head and pronounced a summer cold. "Go back to bed, Precious, and get plenty of rest. You want to be well when school starts."

As soon as she was out of the driveway, down the road and out of sight, I jumped on my bike and headed for Pearl's Parlor.

It was noon when I reached the edge of town. I parked my bicycle under a tree and headed for my familiar spot. The professor was finishing his recitation. His voice seemed flat and dull. He looked up, spotted me, and smiled apologetically, the bravura

gone, the eyes lackluster. Something was wrong. I knew it. Then suddenly I remembered my conversation with his children last week. I looked outside where they had been playing. Only the two blond, skinny ones were there now with Taffy. Just then, the crowd let out a gasp, and I looked back to the stage. The professor was sprawled on the dirt floor, his head resting at a strange angle against the bottom of the barber's chair. It was very clear to me, somehow, that he was dying. I burst forward and was at his side. The crowd melted away, and, in my mind, it was as though only the two of us were there. I knelt down and took the massive head in my lap. "I wanted you to read my palm," I heard myself saying to him.

He smiled, and those eyes cleared again one last time. He looked knowingly at me. I heard his voice, full again, gently teasing, the bravura returning. "That's only for the children among us," he said, gesturing expansively with those great hands.

"I love you, you old dinosaur," I said, but he was already gone, expelling a great last breath.

Border People

Carl Dockery

When they aim for you in their automobiles,
or threaten to leave tracks through you,
remember these border people are deranged
by the perpetual possibility of transition.
They have been conditioned by juxtapositions.
In a frenzy of motion they search for boundaries.
There beyond, and just there, they think
lies the brink of the eternal promise.
They never are exactly here, or now;
borders beckon, so they fly;
their greetings have already said goodbye,
so goodbye, goodbye.
They do not so much go as verge upon discovery.
What signals do they await from those places
eyes burning past you from faraway faces?

Aslan: A Puppy's Legacy

Bobbie Pell

Arrived
late;
Departed
early.

Whimpering, simpering,
Breathing
sighs of safety;
Rising, falling,
rising, falling.

Your heart beating
on
My heart beating
one heart beat.

An old soul
meeting
A new soul
loving.

Here
for a moment;
There
for eternity . . .

Drawing by Richard Croom

Full Moon

Julia Nunnally Duncan

"It's the moon that does it every time," B-Linda said to me as we sat on her back porch. She'd called me earlier and asked me to come by and have supper with her; now we had finished the meal and settled down for a chat.

"When I used to clean up rooms at Broughton Hospital," she said, "you let a full moon come and things went haywire. Them that tended to fall out of bed went flying out every time; food was thrown off of trays; those that couldn't sleep normally, slept; them that could sleep stayed up all night. It was a mess."

"Maybe that's why I watched T.V. all last night," I said. "Well, I woke up at three and felt wide awake the rest of the night. Of course, I haven't slept too well since I've moved to the apartment."

B-Linda looked closely at my face. Her hazel eyes were luminous, round, and shiny with interest. Her eyes, olive skin, and dark, thick hair made her look Italian, like Sophia Loren, I thought.

"Yeah, Helen, your eyes look weak today," she said. "You need some cover cream or powder to hide the shadows. How old d'you say you was?"

"Thirty-one," I answered, though she knew this perfectly well.

"Old as the hills like me," she said. "And nothing to show for it--at least in my case."

She was alluding to the fact that neither of us had a family to speak of--she'd never married; I was recently divorced. Her folks were dead; mine lived in east Tennessee where I was raised.

"At least you have a decent job," she said.

B-Linda worked as a beautician's assistant at a beauty salon, washing customers' hair, sweeping up hair clippings, showing and explaining beauty care products. She'd told me outright that she made minimum wage and worked only four days a week. She considered my job as an English tutor at the local community college a great accomplishment, but the fact was my salary was scarcely higher than hers and I had no benefits as a part-time employee. My weekends were spent selling shoes at a store in town. This is where I met her.

"I don't know about that," I said.

"With your college degree you'll end up teaching full-time," she said. "And then you can go to New Orleans."

She had a catalog from a local touring company that described tours and featured color photographs made at the various destinations. One of the tours was titled "Louisiana Leisure Get-Away" and showed a scene from the French Quarter. This page was dog-eared and coffee-stained.

"That's your dream," I said. "But it actually doesn't sound too bad. It's been a while since I've traveled anywhere." Three years, in fact, when Richard and I took our last trip together to Johnson City to see my parents. If you could call it a trip together. Richard spent most of the time watching T.V. in the living room with my father, neither

of them saying much. I think my father sensed something was wrong before I did; probably why they invited us over.

"Maybe we could go together," B-Linda said. "If I could save my tips. . . ." She let these words fade with the waning light. Her frame house was located at the end of a rural road, fields and woods surrounding it. The shadows of evening came early here, even in August.

"I think I'm in the wrong profession," I said.

"A teacher?" she said, her eyes wide again. She laughed her full, high-pitched laugh, and shook her head. She laughed at me like this frequently.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"You tickle me," she said. "You a teacher in college, around all them smart people all day, and you sitting here saying you're in the wrong profession."

"Don't forget I'm a shoe salesman too."

"Only for now," she said. "You don't know how lucky you are."

"Yeah, till I break my leg and need to go to the hospital. Then we'll see how lucky I am. They probably won't let me in without health insurance."

"They will," she said. "Half the people who come into Broughton didn't have no insurance."

"But that was a state mental hospital, wasn't it?"

"They won't turn you away at any hospital, trust me. When Daddy was sick, then Mama, they didn't have any money that I know of, and the hospital took them in. But who's going to break a leg? You ain't broke a leg in your life."

"One of my students might trip me some time," I said.

"Shit," she said, stretching the word. She rarely used profanity, but when she did it had an impact. "Well," she said, "I'll come and bring you flowers--I can pick them from the garden. Or I'll give you a free hair wash when you get out. I got a key to the salon, and I can get in without the owner knowing."

The sky was dark now except for the moon that cast its pall over the field beyond us. We sat quiet for a while and B-Linda hummed a tune that sounded like a church hymn, though I doubted she knew many of those.

"What's that tune?" I asked.

"Some Irish song. I heard it on a Enya tape Louise plays at the salon. She says Enya soothes the customers, makes them complain less. I like it, but being Irish I guess I would."

"What makes you think you're Irish? You don't look Irish."

"I'm Irish," she said. "That's what my mama told me, and as far as I know she never lied. Except to my daddy that one night when I come in late. But she didn't lie about important things."

"When did you come in late?"

"Well, that was when I was thirteen and had gone out with some older kids--boys and girls, you know. We drove out to the West Cove Baptist Church and stole the church bell. Threw it in the Catawba River. I told Mama, but she swore she'd never tell Daddy, which was a kind of lie, I reckon. She told me to forget about it and pray God would forget it too. She was good like that."

"You miss her, I guess." I missed my parents, but I couldn't go running back to them now. I didn't want them to think I'd made a total mess of my life in North Carolina.

B-Linda didn't often speak about her people, though I'd asked about them, and now she peered at the moon, quiet again.

"I reckon I do," she said finally. "But she nor daddy had much of a life, here in this house. As you can see it ain't a mansion. You should've seen the snakes that used to crawl in on this porch--"

I looked at the rotted boards where my feet rested, and she saw this and laughed.

"Lookee there I see a copperhead 'bout to strike you--" she said and reached and pinched my ankle.

"B-Linda," I said, frowning and shaking my head. "Can't you behave a minute?"

"O.K., teacher," she said. "I'll be a good student." She laughed under her breath in the half light.

"My mama said the moon caused my daddy to be peculiar," she said when she stopped laughing. "You know, the way men get when they smell perfume on a woman's breast--"

I thought about this for a minute. "Sexually?" I asked, a little surprised she would mention this. In the six months I'd known her--and we'd shared a good many meals in this time--she'd not discussed sex. I'd wanted to tell her about Richard's affair, but it didn't seem proper, somehow, to approach the subject. I'd never even discussed it with my mother.

"Well, yeah," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked. Frankly, it'd been a while since I'd been subjected to sex one way or another, and I wanted to talk about it.

"Well, Mama said as sure as the full moon appeared in the sky, Daddy started pacing, just like a wolf. You know, edgy-like. She said he'd hardly touch his supper, leave meat scraps on the plate--though he loved meat--and push his plate back early. He'd sit there looking at the oil cloth like he was trying to understand the patterns on it. Come to think of it, I remember him doing this, just studying the oil cloth in the lamplight. We had a kerosene lamp on the table--no electricity when I was little."

"I didn't know that," I said, a bit impatient she'd gotten sidetracked.

"Mama said he'd push his plate back and sit there. Then he'd go out to the garden and stand, staring at the sky. When I saw him acting like that, I figured he was worrying about the corn being planted too thick or the worms eating it.

"But it was when he come into their bedroom that it really started, Mama said. She said he'd look at her and walk to the dresser mirror and look at his reflection, and walk to the window and stare out for a while, then come back to the foot of the bed with the most forlorn expression and start calling her name: 'Mary, Mary. . .' like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders or some dark secret he couldn't tell.

"'Mary, Mary,' he'd say, "and she said finally she just blew out the lamp and threw back the covers to allow him in."

"She didn't tell me the details, which I did not want to hear anyway, but she said those were long nights for her. She said I was conceived in the light of a full moon, and I don't doubt it."

"Really?" I said and tried to remember if Richard's lovemaking had been different on moonlit nights. In the early days, his hands were tender, yet eager as they searched my face and breasts, and we made love, fell sleep, and woke to begin again.

But by the time we visited my parents that September, we lay in the iron bed, our backs to each other, and I knew his hands belonged to someone else.

"Yeah," B-Linda said. "It's the moon that makes a person act different."

"Maybe so," I said and realized I longed for someone to stand at my bed and call my name, someone who wanted me so urgently, he was afraid of his desire.

"Was your mama scared at those times, do you think?" I heard my voice in the night and hoped the cloud that passed over the moon would hide the blood in my face. I held my hand on my cheek and felt its heat.

"I never asked her," she said. "It didn't seem none of my business at the time. Can you imagine telling a young girl a story like that?"

"But maybe she needed to talk to somebody about it. Didn't you ever think she wanted to talk to you about it?"

"I reckon," she said, "but there's some things that's best kept to yourself."

"Maybe," I said. I had seen framed pictures of B-Linda's parents propped on the mantle above the stone fireplace in the front room. One of the pictures was an old one of her father, whose dark eyes and dark hair combed slick from his brow reminded me of Valentino. I noticed he had a dimple in his chin, a feature I'd found especially appealing. "Handsome," I'd told B-Linda when I first saw the picture. "He has a dimple like Richard's." She said, "He must've been fresh out of the cradle then; that ain't the way I remember him."

And her mother, in another faded photograph, was plainer than the man, but still attractive with deep-set pale eyes and wavy, brown hair to her shoulders. It was no wonder B-Linda was nice looking.

I thought about these pictures, and we sat silent for a while.

Finally B-Linda said, "Come to think of it, it was a full moon when we stole the bell."

"B-Linda," I said, "sometimes there are things I'd like to talk about, too. You know, it's hard to keep them to yourself."

"And it sunk straight to the bottom of the river," she said, tossing her head and laughing. "And nobody ever saw it again." She laughed and looked at the moonlit field as if she looked into the muddy waters of the Catawba.

Forgotten Seasons

Ren Decatur

A golden monarch busily
Flits from bloom to bloom
Seeking the sustaining nectar
That boils winged blood.

Darting across wildflower
Meadows steeped in summer heat,
Tasting the maiden air,
Taking the urgent dare,
He drives on.

Then an ethereal blossom
Tendrils a soothing embrace
Proffering, promising,
To end his race
To fill that space.

Quietly, knowingly, he
Parts with pasts,
Pushes up pastel paths,
And they nestle
In each other's arms

Until the seasons
All forget themselves.

And I

Roy McGinnis

And I
to write
some fair and foreign prose
in order to survive.
Is survival at the center of my soul?
To trade a buck for gold?
To cash my heart on stories told?
I've tried, dear Lord, I've tried
to stretch the meter
to form the mold
and beat the ounce to stretch across the dome.
But all I ever get from my own forge is fire and fury
and minute glints from dross
enough to fill a thimble
or circle a finger.

Woodcut by Shirley McLaughlin

Joy in November

Will Hooper

It was tangled in November's fires
in leaves and sky--
the sun
sharp and dry like
the smell of steel on your hands

"'n daddy was good at it--
knew just where to make the cut--
I'd hold it by the back feet 'n Ray'd
hold it in front
'n daddy he'd slit the throat
right fast
then he'd slip 'at knife down
on past the throat 'n he'd cut
the aorta--and the blood just spurted--"

it was there in the smell
swirling in smoke of leaves
as green and orange and brown
faded to piles of ashgray
under a sharp cold heat red sunset

"--one time it got me--
squirted me all over! usually we just
let the blood pour on the ground
--the dogs licked it up--
then daddy'd make us go all
the way down the field'n
bury the guts--I told 'm
the dogs'd eat them too--
but hell he never listened
--and there after all 'at work
--us bury'n em' 'n all--
wouldn't you know 'em dogs'd
be down there before the night
was through diggin' 'em up
and eaten 'em--"

the sun is a red delicious

"and then we'd scald the hair
off its skin--now to do that
we'd pour boiling water all over it--
'at got rid of most of it--"

No it is not an apple
it is the air that is cold and sweet

"and then we'd stuff it down through
a long metal shaft--'at scraped off
the rest of it--"

a shiver slid down my back

"then we shoved an iron rod down
its mouth 'n all the way through
so we could connect it up over a fire"

Fall shadows are gold and red

"and it cooked over an open fire
all day 'n night 'n day again"

Our shadows are gold and red

"It was there in the smell
of roasting pig 'n the embers
below--
Boy! that was our joy in November--
we'd slice strips of lean meat off
its side 'n its butt--
mama'd collect the fat from under
the skin 'n put it in jars
'n grease her pans all winter--"

  all winter shadows are
diamond speckle white and taste
  like snow cream--
fall shadows are gold and red

And leaves and sky
And embers
And fire said--

  I am November

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

The Chainsaw

Robert Morgan

Somebody had been sawing down billboards out on I-26 past town. For the third time in a month it was reported by state troopers that a big sign had been toppled on the same stretch of Interstate. Of course the highway patrol was doing all they could with the investigation. They'll take charge of anything they can and try to get their pictures in all the papers. And because the vandalism had been committed along the Interstate, and because they were the first to report it, they announced they were launching an extensive investigation.

My boss, Sheriff Ward, didn't pay much attention to the billboard destruction at first. He sent me out to look at the damage in the weeds and brush above the highway and I wrote up a routine report. "This is just some teenage hoodlums tired of knocking over mailboxes," he said.

But after the third billboard was cut the advertising company that owned the signs, and the companies that rented their space, complained to the Chamber of Commerce, and the president of the Chamber of Commerce complained to the county commissioners. The county was in the middle of a campaign to attract business to the area, and an editorial in The Times-News pointed out it could not help to have business property destroyed in plain sight of the tens of thousands of cars that passed on I-26 every day.

That's when Sheriff Ward called all us deputies into his office. He was fat and bald, and he was red-faced, just the kind of sheriff you see in the movies. He loved to have his picture in the paper, and he hated more than anything to be criticized in print, especially with an election coming up in the fall.

"Boys, I don't have to tell you how little I like this situation," he said. "Some crazy kids are sawing down signboards and the paper is blaming us." The sheriff wiped his finger across his nose as he always did when he was busy thinking. "The state troopers claim to be studying the case; and the town police would like to get their dirty fingers on it, but the signs are outside the city limits. It's in our county and it looks like we've got it on our hands."

I had been a deputy for four years and I don't think I'd ever seen the sheriff so riled about a case. I think it was the suggestion in the paper that we were impeding the development of the county by not catching the sign cutters that got to him. Ward knew that to be reelected this year he would need the support of the paper and some business money, as well as the country people who had been his traditional constituency. Things were changing in the county.

"Now the thing about teenagers is you can't predict them," he said. "Since they're not doing it for money or anything else that makes sense, who knows where they will strike again, or when. Whoever it is may never saw down another sign. Or they might cut one tonight on the Kanuga Road."

The sheriff was right about that. We had never been able to catch the teenagers that took crowbars and smashed mailboxes at night or stole hubcaps and sold them in South Carolina. They did their work in no predictable time or fashion.

"If we don't catch them in the act of cutting the signs I don't see how we can catch them," Sheriff Ward said. "Anybody that can get their hands on a chainsaw could be doing it." Ward stopped in front of the new computer that was hooked up to the state police network. "I don't think this thing can help us," he said. "And I sure as hell don't want the highway patrol messing around in my jurisdiction." He stopped in front of me and knocked his finger on my chest.

"Jenkins, you go out there and look at this new sign. See if you can find any tracks or clues about the saw they may have used. The rest of you use your contacts among the high school kids and junior deputies to see what you turn up. The kids will know who's doing this."

"What if it ain't kids?" Deputy Clark said.

"It's young punks with nothing better to do," Sheriff Ward said.

I had taken a course in forensics over at the technical college in Asheville, so the sheriff usually sent me out to collect tracks or prints or other evidence. The truth was I didn't get many chances to use what I had learned. You don't need much forensic skill to haul in drunks that have busted up a tavern or serve eviction notices and warrants for court appearances, which is mostly the kind of work we did.

I drove out to I-26 just east of town. I could see why they had not cut down any signs along Four Seasons Boulevard: there were too many lights and too many filling stations and all-night fast food places along there. The signs they had cut were all out of the city limits and beyond the street lights.

I parked on the shoulder of the Interstate and climbed up the steep bank through weeds and blackberry briars. They hadn't mowed the bank that high and briars picked at my twill pants. Grasshoppers fluttered away and crickets clicked in the brush. There is something sad about late summer. I used to feel that as a boy on the farm. All the weeds and grass are turning yellow and dying like they are giving up. I climbed over the chainlink fence and saw the downed sign. It looked like a drive-in movie screen toppled over and warped on the brush and saplings. It was an ad for the Buick company and the picture of a Riviera looked wrenched around.

The sign had been held on creosoted telephone poles. But whoever sawed the poles must have been blind, for the cuts were uneven, at different heights and in different places, like whoever did it was drunk or working in the dark without a light. The weeds had been tromped down all around and there were so many tracks you couldn't make anything out of them. State troopers and news people and spectators had been there. It was too late to get any tracks.

I was bent over looking at one of the stumps when I heard steps behind me. I turned and saw a woman reporter holding a microphone and a man with a camcorder pointed at me.

"I'm Jessica Finch from WTTB News," she said. "Do you have any clues to this mystery of the felled billboards?" She thrust the mike to my mouth.

"We're completing our investigation now, and I'm sure we'll apprehend whoever is doing this," I said. I was proud of how professional I sounded.

"Do you have any idea who might be doing this?" she said.

"As soon as we have completed our investigation there will be an announcement," I said.

When she was gone I looked at the stumps and poles again. In the August sun the wood looked like it had been clawed and chewed and hacked at with the saw. Whoever had done it either couldn't see or had never used a chainsaw before. It might have been some kids that stole their daddy's saw. That was a place to start: find out if any chainsaws had been reported stolen.

By the time I got back in the car my shirt was wet with sweat. The air conditioning felt good as I headed back toward town. As I drove I kept thinking about the ugly awkward cut marks on the poles.

The thing about a chainsaw is you have to nurse it and pamper it. A chainsaw is like a baby in a lot of ways. You mix up its gas and oil like a formula, and you watch to see it doesn't get too hot, doesn't get pinched in a log, and doesn't get dry of oil. A thousand things can go wrong. Sometimes a saw won't start, and you have to jerk and jerk and jerk the cord. Sometimes it stalls out coughing and smoking. A chainsaw will burn out just when you need it most. Or it will jump back off a log and split your head open. If you hit a wire or nail the chain will send out a shower of sparks and maybe break off and slam you right in the face. When I used to cut pulp wood with my daddy and Uncle Zack the thing I feared most was hitting a knot and having the chain bounce right into my eyes.

If I went back to the office the sheriff would just ask me what I found. And I would have to admit I hadn't come up with much. Later he would find I had gotten myself on television, and that would really make him mad. I turned onto the Asheville Highway to circle around a little and cool off. But I called Shirley, our administrative assistant, on the radio.

"Has anybody reported a chainsaw stolen?" I asked.

"Not that I have heard," she said. "Are you missing one?"

"No, but I bet somebody is," I said.

"I can check on the net with nearby counties," Shirley said.

"Thanks," I said.

Rather than drive back to the office I decided to look again at the other two signs that had been cut. I preferred to take the heat of the August sun to the snarling of Ward. In any case I couldn't come up with less than I already had.

The other two signs looked pretty much like the third. Their stumps might have been hacked by a sledge hammer as much as sawed. They could have been cut by someone so high they didn't know what they were doing. The advertising company had already salvaged most of the first sign, but they had left the stumps in the bank. The second sign lay where it had fallen, an ad for the new Pisgah Forest Estates, with a picture of a waterfall crumpled and twisted where it had fallen. That sign had been braced and the braces had been sawed also. A sign that big would have a lot of pressure on it in a high wind. It could be dangerous to cut one down on a windy night.

Since I didn't have anything better to do I walked around the trampled weeds and brush looking at broken sticks and hundreds of tracks and candy wrappers. All the billboards had to be built outside the fenced right of way of the highway. That meant anybody coming from the highway would have to climb over the fence in the dark

holding the chainsaw or handing it to an accomplice. And to get away they would have to crawl back over the fence.

I swung further out into the brush and saw a haulroad about a hundred and fifty feet away. There were tire tracks in the dirt of the road. The tracks ran out through the woods to the edge of a field. That was the way the vandals had come and gone. They hadn't been on the highway at all. No wonder nobody on the Interstate had seen them. The state troopers would never have a chance at them.

I checked out the other two sites again, and sure enough there was a haulroad within a hundred yards of each of the cut signs. I knew I had found out something, though I wasn't sure exactly what. At the very least it meant the chainsawers were familiar with the countryside, with the backroads and dirt roads. By the time I got back to the office Ward had left for the day.

That night I was going to a social in the basement of the Methodist church. It was the first time I had attended any kind of church in more than ten years. Most of my socializing was done in bars, or at the VFW. I'd had some good times, and I'd had the shaft too. Mostly things hadn't worked out with me and girls. After my last girlfriend Cindy had left me I hadn't known what to do. I was not as young as I used to be, and the interesting girls were looking for accountants and computer programmers, somebody with a future. As least that's the way it seemed. They were looking for boys with clothes from The Gap.

Even if I picked up a girl for the night she wouldn't let me take her out again. She found out I lived in a trailer out on Highway 64 behind my brother Charlie's house, and that I was a deputy sheriff, and she lost interest. She wouldn't answer her phone and she always had something else to do.

I was drinking so much that summer I didn't blame girls for avoiding me. Hell, I would like to have avoided myself. I was feeling sorry for myself, and I could get ugly. I had a chip on my shoulder, and it wasn't any computer chip. It was a chunk of wood the size of a chopping block. One night I went to the Salty Dog, and then I went to the Forty-Niner. The last thing I remember was trying to break in on a couple dancing at The Checkmate.

Next thing I knew I was waking up with my face in a puddle in the parking lot across the road from The Checkmate. I didn't know how I had got over there, but suddenly there was a cruiser parked in front of me and O'Brien, a town policeman, was standing over me. He hauled me into city hall and called Sheriff Ward. I had a shiner and a cut lip.

When Ward came to get me he waited until we got in his car before he said anything. "You're even dumber than I thought," he said. I patted my bleeding lip.

"Jenkins, if you've got to get drunk do it in your trailer or go to the next county. Or look for another job."

I knew better than to say anything. When the sheriff was riled you had to let him talk himself out. "This happens again you're history," he said. "History!"

After I got back to the trailer I lay there all night without sleeping. I kept thinking of my face in that dirty water smelling of motor oil and vomit and the taste of blood in my throat. I thought of how many times my mother, before she died, had asked me to go to church, and how my brother Charlie had asked me to go to church. My eye felt

like it was full of muddy water where it was swollen shut. I saw I had to change if I wanted to live much longer.

"People in trouble have to reinvent themselves," a woman on the radio had said the week before. I listened to the radio a lot while I was cruising around the county. I liked the talk shows in particular. As I lay there in the trailer with my face hurting I knew the time had come to reinvent myself.

But it wouldn't be enough to just go to a revival meeting and come forward and get saved. Oh no. I had seen too many people do that and get baptized and join the church, and then after a few weeks or months go back to their old lives. Hell, I'd even done it myself a couple of times when I was younger and just felt foolish afterward. This time it had to be something different, something that would last.

My brother Charlie had married a Methodist, and my sister-in-law Jennie had told me several times I should join their church's Young Adult Fellowship. It was a good place to meet other young people, she said.

"I'm not hardly young anymore," I said.

"You're not hardly adult either," Charlie said. That's the way Charlie always goes at me. He figures being the older brother gives him the right, and the fact that I keep my trailer in his backyard.

"There are some nice people that go to the Fellowship meetings," Jennie said. "And they have projects that are useful."

The next meeting of the Fellowship was on Friday night at eight and that's where I was going. I showered and put on fresh jeans and a new cowboy shirt. I even put on aftershave. The meeting was in the basement of the Methodist church on Vance Street.

Jennie was right about all the people being friendly. They smiled at me, and they didn't ask me to stand up and introduce myself or anything, the way I was afraid they would. They sat around for a while and discussed their new project, which was to clean up the roadsides around the county. On Saturdays they went out in teams to pick up trash from the shoulders and ditches. Come to think of it, I had seen them gathering trash into orange plastic bags which they left on the shoulders to be picked up. And they talked about planting flowers and shrubs around intersections and overpasses on the Interstate,

"Somebody is helping by cutting down billboards," a pretty woman with brown hair said.

"That's too radical for us," the assistant minister said.

"And illegal," I said. But I was sorry I had said it. I didn't want them to think of me as a law enforcement officer.

"Along with air pollution and water pollution and noise pollution, we have sight pollution along the highways," the woman with brown hair said. She wore a loose old-timey dress and no make up. Her skin was smooth as a baby's.

They agreed to go out along the Kanuga Road the next day and pick up bottles and cans and paper. The project to plant poppies around overpasses and intersections would be taken up at the next meeting. The assistant minister would apply to the church for funds to buy seeds and bulbs and more equipment.

After the discussion the assistant minister stood up and led in prayer. But it wasn't a long prayer like they have at revival meetings. It was a short sweet prayer of

thanks. When he said amen the rest of them said amen, and I said it too. Then he shook hands with me. "I'm Jerry Johnson," he said. "Welcome to the Fellowship."

"Larry Jenkins," I said. "My brother Charlie is a member here."

They came up one after the other to shake hands and say they were happy I stopped by. The last was Karen, the brown haired woman. She looked directly into my eyes and smiled. Her hand was soft but strong.

"What do you do, Larry?" she said.

"I'm a deputy," I said, "in the sheriff's department."

A wave passed through her face, like she saw she was talking to the enemy. She looked to the side, and then back at me. "Is that so?" she said.

"It's a job," I said, "Just a job."

"Really?" she said, like she was hearing me for the first time. "You mean you carry a gun and club and everything?"

"I even carry handcuffs," I said.

She acted more surprised than she really was. Then she nodded and put her hand on my elbow to guide me to the refreshment table. There was juice and celery and carrot sticks, and cookies that tasted like nuts and granola.

"Are you coming with us tomorrow?" she said. "I guess I could," I said. I had been thinking of driving over to Dollywood that Saturday to see the country music show. Dolly Parton herself was supposed to be there that weekend.

"You could help us out," Karen said. "Do you drive a pickup?" "I have a Dodge Ram," I said.

"If you brought your truck you could haul the sacks of trash," she said. "We could take them right to the dump."

"If it would help," I said. Her eyes were the same shade of brown as her hair.

"Wonderful," she said, and clapped her hands together. "Listen everybody," she said, "Larry is going to bring his truck tomorrow and help us." There was a cheer all around.

So there I was the next day, out along the Kanuga Road picking up trash. I hoped nobody from the department, and nobody from The Salty Dog, would pass and see me. I remembered how silly those people had looked to me before, stooped over and gathering garbage into their orange sacks. I worked alongside Karen and the others, picking up beer cans and McDonald's styrofoam, kotex and kleenex, paper bags with rotten apples, condoms and torn copies of Playboy. Karen picked up condoms and put them in the bag without saying a word.

Later she rode with me in the Ram to dump the sacks. "I hope they haven't closed the landfill," she said. I noticed it was past three o'clock.

Karen sat on the seat with the belt fastened and her legs spread wide under the old fashioned dress. Her legs were tanned a little, but she was the only woman in the group that had not worn shorts. "Maybe we'll see the bears," she said.

Lately there had been reports of bears feeding at the county dump. People had seen them in the early morning. The bears must have come all the way from the Smokies. The mast had been killed by a late frost that year, and the bears had come down into the valleys looking for groceries, the newspaper said. The department had

had several calls about bears, but every time we answered a complaint the bear had already gone.

We arrived at the entrance to the landfill, but sure enough there was a chain across the road. The sign said the dump was closed on Saturdays after three. "Now what do we do?" I said.

"Park here and carry the sacks in," Karen said.

"You don't want to carry them that far," I said.

"Why not, there can't be more than ten or twelve bags?"

I locked the truck and we each took a bag in either hand. Karen was stronger than she looked, for those bags were heavy. The road up the hill was dusty as flour. The ruts had washed out and there were rocks and gravel in the tracks. Crickets sang in the dry weeds. Karen was wearing sandals and her feet slipped several times on the gravel. Each time she dropped a bag, but only laughed and picked it up again. Her figure under the dress was slim and strong.

At the dump the bulldozer sat to one side of the turning area. Even though it was silent the machine looked ready to charge at us, as if it was guarding the site. Birds pecked at garbage and I saw several rats rippling away.

"Let's put these over there," I said, nodding toward the closest uncovered trash. We threw the bags over the bank among refrigerators and the stew of magazines and bottles. There was a perfume coming off the heaps, a rich musky and fruity stink.

"That's a whiff of the future," Karen said. "Someday the whole planet will be covered by garbage if we keep going this way."

We made two more trips from the truck. It was a quarter of a mile up the hill and Karen was sweating and flushed by the time we threw the last bags over the bank. But I was even more out of breath than she was. "I must be out of shape," I said, and leaned over, resting my hands on my knees.

Karen turned and looked at me and screamed. I spun around to see what had scared her and found myself facing a fat black bear. I don't know where it came from. It must have been hiding in the woods or behind the bulldozer.

Now what do you say to a bear? I had killed deer, and even a wild boar one time in the mountains near Robbinsville. But I had never seen a bear outside the park in the Smokies. This one was so close I could smell it.

"Oh my God," Karen said.

I put out my hands on either side as though to protect her. Now the bear's eyes looked funny. I don't know any way to describe them except to say the bear's eyes looked drunk. I'd heard bears can't see much beyond a few yards anyway. Maybe the bear had been eating fermented garbage or the mash from a bootlegger's still.

"We better run," Karen said.

I thought, maybe this bear just wants to get past us to the garbage. It's hungry and we're blocking its way. I stepped to the left, still holding out my hands, but the bear moved that way too. I stepped quick to the right, and the bear did also.

"Oh no," Karen said. She moved right behind me, so there were the three of us all stepping in the same direction. I shifted to the right again, and the bear followed me. I'd heard of bears that stood on their hind legs and tried to wrestle people. Maybe this bear wanted to fight that way.

"Run!" I said to Karen and jumped further to the left. But she must have made up her mind to dash that way at the same instant for we slammed into each other and my head rang like it had a clapper inside it. I fell right on top of her and she groaned and cried out. As I rolled clear I expected to be facing the bear, but I only saw its rump as it bounded toward the landfill. Its moves had mirrored mine the way people meeting in a hall sometimes do a dance before they can get past each other. "Lord help us," Karen said as she brushed herself off. I knew it was funny, but we were too shook up to laugh until we got back to the truck. And then we had a good giggle at the spectacle we had made of ourselves.

I thought Karen was interested in me because I was different from the other people she knew. She would never have met me if I hadn't shown up at the Young Adult Fellowship. She had been to college, and she worked as a teacher for handicapped kids. She had an office at the community college where she counseled other teachers who did special teaching. And she traveled all over the county to study children who had special needs.

I had never met anybody else who did so many things. She taught classes in vegetarian cooking on the local cable channel. She belonged to an exercise club and she went running two mornings a week before prayer breakfast at the church.

"I don't see how you do it," I said to her that first Saturday.

"I don't eat meat," she said.

"Then you don't like hunters?" I said.

"I don't mind hunters," she said, "as long as they don't eat what they kill."

I think I was already in love with her. Her clear face and bright skin reminded me of something I had forgotten. Her slim hips and strong shoulders took me way back to when I was first interested in girls. She was so natural and perfect.

"You can be a lot of help," she said in the truck.

"To who?" I said.

"To all of us at the Fellowship," she said.

"I want to help," I said.

She looked at me to see if I was mocking her, and blew a strand of hair away from her mouth. "What are you working on now?" she said. "I mean as a deputy."

"Nothing big," I said. "I'm supposed to catch these kids that are cutting down billboards."

"Do you really want to catch them?" she said. "After all, they are helping to clean up the roadside and countryside."

"They're vandals, according to the law," I said.

"Or maybe heroes," she said.

Before she got out at her apartment I asked when I could see her again.

"Next Friday, at the Fellowship," she said.

"I mean before that," I said.

"On Monday night I go to the fitness club. On Tuesday I attend the Friends of the Earth meeting. On Wednesday the Antivivisection Society meets, and on Thursday there is a hearing concerned with pollution in the French Broad Valley."

"How can you do all that?" I said.

"How can I not?" she said.

So I agreed to attend the Friends of the Earth meeting with her on Tuesday.

On Monday Sheriff Ward was in worse humor than he had been the week before. Another billboard had been sawed down on the Interstate, this time north of town toward Fletcher. He sent me out to look at the destruction, and this time I found exactly what I had at the other sites. There were trampled weeds and brush and sneaker tracks, and the poles looked as if they had been gnawed off by a tiger. And sure enough, there was a haulroad about a hundred yards beyond the fallen sign.

This time a picture of the toppled billboard appeared in the paper and Ward got a call from the chairman of the county commissioners. He summoned us all into his office like delinquent children. When he was mad the sheriff walked up and down in front of us like a football coach chewing out his team.

"We're going to catch those little bastards if we have to camp out behind every sign on the Interstate," Ward said. "I'm going to increase the night patrols. There will be one of you on the highway at every hour every night until we make an arrest. Is that clear?"

Ward gave me the shift from twelve to two each morning. I was supposed to cruise the highway continuously then, looking for parked cars or flashlights in the brush.

"What if these ain't kids?" Deputy Clark said.

"What do you mean?" Sheriff Ward said.

"What if these are outside agitators, you know, Sheriff, like the eco-radicals you hear about on television? Environmental extremists dedicated to overthrowing business?"

"We'll catch them," the sheriff said. "But these are not outside radicals. These are teenage punks. Ain't that right, Jenkins?"

"That's right," I said. I was going to suggest we might patrol the backroads near the Interstate, but I knew Ward would just tell me to shut up and do what I was told.

That night I stayed up till midnight and got out on I-26 and drove up and down from the exit at Tryon in the south to the exit at Fletcher in the north. I looked at each sign and I checked out each parked car. But I didn't find a thing but teenagers making out.

On Tuesday I drove Karen to the Friends of the Earth meeting. And afterward she invited me back to her apartment. She had talked so much about health food it surprised me when she offered a beer. From all her church work and interest in herbs and vitamins and fitness, I wouldn't have thought she would drink anything. But there she was offering me this fancy kind of beer from Boston.

"Beer is a natural food," she said. "It's part of our heritage."

"Well I'll be damned," I said.

"Temperance doesn't mean abstinence," she said.

"I'm glad to hear it," I said.

There were other surprises about Karen. You had the feeling she was tanned under the loose old-fashioned dress, that she was tanned all over. Where skin showed through a sleeve or around the neck it was always tanned. It had something to do also

with the sense of freedom and control in the way she moved, as if she was used to being without her clothes. I couldn't explain it.

"Have you caught the billboard cutters?" she said. Her face glowed as she sipped the beer.

"Not yet," I said, "but we will."

"How do you plan to do it?" she said.

"However we can," I said.

"I know," she said. "You can't reveal police secrets."

Later I walked down the hall to the bathroom. There were pictures all along the wall and one of them was a big picture of a naked woman. At first I thought it was a painting. But then I looked closer in the dim light and saw it was a photograph. The woman was lying on a rock and her hair was spread out in a kind of fan. She was half turned away but you could see one breast with a hard nipple and her smooth tanned thigh. I looked at the face again and saw it was Karen. That gave me a funny feeling. I couldn't think of anything else while I was in the bathroom.

Karen was jolly when I returned to the kitchen. "You look like you saw a ghost," she said.

"I was studying your picture," I said.

"Oh that." she said. "That was when I was in college. I had a friend who was a photographer."

I poured myself another beer and sat down.

"It was a woman, if you must know," Karen said. But that seemed like the strangest thing of all, that a woman had taken the picture of her naked on the rock.

"You have been a big help." Karen said. "I'm so glad you helped on the road project." A smile quivered around the corners of her mouth. She looked at me over the top of her glass. "I have another project in mind," she said. "But this one is just for you and me."

"What is it?" I said.

"I can't tell you until the weekend," she said. Karen looked like a little girl all flushed and bursting with a secret. She put her elbows on the table and looked me in the eyes.

When I left that night I promised to see her on Saturday and to help with the road project.

All that week as I patrolled along the Interstate I thought only about Karen and the things she had said. At the office I sat in front of the computer but couldn't concentrate.

"What are you daydreaming about?" Ward said.

"Who is he daydreaming about?" Shirley said.

Shirley's computer check of stolen chainsaws had turned up only three cases, and they were in outlying counties. It was possible some teenager had gone over to Buncombe or Transylvania county to steal a chainsaw. But that was unlikely. Punks were usually too lazy to go further than the local school or filling station to commit vandalism.

"Now if we could just find out who has bought a chainsaw in the last month," I said, "we might get somewhere."

"We can," Shirley said. "I mean I think we can." Shirley had taken several computer courses at Blue Ridge Tech and she was proud of her ability to use E-mail and access bulletin boards and services on the Net.

"How?" I said.

"Two ways. We call all the stores in the county and ask for names of those who have bought chainsaws in the past six weeks. Of course some people just walk in and plunk down cash and the store never knows their names. And local people could go down to the malls in Greenville or over to Asheville."

"What is the second way?" I said.

"We E-mail the major chainsaw companies and ask for names of those who have registered warranties on new chainsaws from this area in the past month."

"Will the companies cooperate?" Ward said.

"We can try," Shirley said.

I went over to Ryan's for the lunch bar and by the time I got back Shirley had put a list on my desk. Eight purchasers from the county had registered warranties on chainsaws in the past month. I went down the list of names and addresses, but there was nobody I recognized. I went over it again and saw the next to last entry was the local chapter of Friends of the Earth. I felt my cheeks get cold and sweat break out on the back of my neck. I remembered all the times Karen had talked approvingly of cuttings down the billboards. It was farfetched to believe that she or other members of the Friends were doing the destruction, and yet there was their name on the computer readout. It was hard to imagine what use such a group could have for a chainsaw. They were more into planting trees and protecting wetlands from development than in cutting down anything.

I studied the names again before driving out to Hooper's Creek to serve a subpoena. Then I drove to a trailer park on Willow to witness the damage a tenant had done to a rental mobile home. The tenant hadn't left a forwarding address.

As soon as I thought she would be home I called Karen on the carphone. "How's business?" she said.

"Business is bad," I said.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"Why would Friends of the Earth buy a chainsaw?" I said.

There was a pause at the other end. "What is this about?" she said. "Is this sheriff's business?"

"Yes, it's sheriff's business," I said. I was sweating even in the air conditioning.

"I don't know, Larry," she said.

"Can't you tell me?" I said.

"We have a project to clean up dead trees and scrub from a lot out near Fruitland," Karen said. "The chapter bought the chainsaw also to clear away brush from trails and access roads. I haven't had time to help them, but I know that's what they are doing. My time recently has been taken up with other things, as you may have noticed."

"Well that explains that," I said.

"You don't think we sawed down your precious billboards?" she said and laughed.

"No no, it's just that I had to check."

"Check on what?"

"On all recent chainsaw purchases," I said.

Before I hung up she invited me to come by the next day after work. "I have a bottle of Australian chardonnay in the fridge," she said. "And a new pasta I want you to try."

"I'll be there," I said.

As soon as I hung up Sheriff Ward came on the radio. "I want you to take two shifts on I-26 tonight," he said.

"When?" I said.

"Ten to two," he said. "Marlette's wife is having a baby down in Tryon and we wouldn't want him out on the highway even if he was willing."

"Yes sir," I said.

"And another thing, Jenkins," the sheriff said. "Stay off the carphone except for sheriff's business."

Ward had been listening in on my call to Karen. I slammed the mike back into its holder and headed out to the Asheville highway for some coffee and shrimp.

That night I started my patrol at the north end of the county. But instead of driving up and down the Interstate as we had been doing I decided to cruise the county roads closest to I-26 on either side. It was risky, because I knew the sheriff wouldn't approve. And since the backroads wound all over the place you might miss somebody even while they were out there sawing down another billboard. But our usual method had turned up nothing, and I didn't see there was anything to lose. The vandals were coming in from behind the highway and if I could find the haulroad they were using I might actually apprehend them. The thing was to look for anything suspicious on the backroads and check it out.

The dirt roads were dusty in late summer and I raised a funnel of dust behind me. I could smell the dust coming through the air conditioning. Next day the cruiser would be covered with dust and I'd have to wash it before Sheriff Ward saw it. But at least you could tell if somebody had passed in the last few minutes because it took a while for the dust to settle.

I bumped over potholes and broken macadam and eased through several little hollows I hadn't seen in years. When I got down to Saluda I crossed the highway on an overpass and worked my way back up the eastern side. Here and there I found cars and pickups parked in haulroads and fields, but it was just teenagers out to enjoy themselves. I turned my spotlight toward them to be sure, and then left them alone.

It was near midnight when I got past Druid Hills north of town where there was a bunch of billboards on the eastern side. I turned onto a little paved road with woods on both sides. I decided to stop and turn off my lights and engine. Just looking had gotten me nowhere. Maybe listening would help. I lowered the window.

At first there was nothing but the drone of traffic on the Interstate. And then I heard a door slam. I waited. There was a buzz like an angry hornet. It could only be a chainsaw. The sound stopped, then started again with several pops that became a roar. I couldn't see any light in the direction of the noise.

I got out of the car and took a flashlight from the back seat. I had a bulletproof vest in the trunk, but decided not to bother with it. I tried to remember if I had seen a

haulroad or entrance to a field before I turned the lights off. Heat from the macadam rose in the dark. There were crickets in the weeds along the ditches, but they got quiet as I walked by, then started up again. I walked about a hundred yards and stopped. The buzz went silent and I listened to the crickets.

There had to be a haulroad leading toward the Interstate for I hadn't seen any car or truck stopped on the county road. I strained to see in the starlight, but it was impossible to find an opening in the woods. The hornet buzz started again. I switched on the flashlight and swept the beam down the road. There was a haulroad about fifty feet ahead. I clicked the light off and headed toward the track into the woods.

Walking carefully, hoping not to break a stick or step on a copperhead, I felt my way along the track toward the sound of the saw. I almost ran into a pickup before I caught the gleam of starlight off its windshield. The roar of the saw was just to my right, toward the highway.

And then I saw the flashlight. It moved like a fish in an aquarium going this way and that, holding steady for a moment then moving again. I crouched down and eased my way forward.

"Hold it steady, damn it," somebody said.

I could see the posts and braces in the cone of light. And way above I saw the billboard like a huge sail against the sky. The floodlight shot above it from the other side. I edged over and saw it was an ad for the Chevrolet company in Fletcher with a picture of a new Lumina.

The saw started roaring and smoke boiled up in front of the flashlight. Whoever was doing the sawing didn't know how to keep the chain from pinching. There was a screech as if the chain had hit a bolt or nail. I saw a slim figure with long hair holding the saw and someone almost as slight holding the flashlight. I took my .38 out of its holster and held it in my right hand as I eased forward.

"Hurry," someone said.

"Freeze," I shouted as I switched on the flashlight in my left hand. "Don't run or I will shoot," I said.

The figure holding the saw turned toward me and long hair fell across the face. I was afraid it was going to be Karen, but as I stepped closer I saw it was just a punk in a Grateful Dead T-shirt. Long greasy hair hung in his eyes. "What the hell?" he said.

"Let's go boys," I said. "I know where there's a special room reserved just for you."

As soon as I got them to town I would call Karen and tell her the case was solved.

Watercolor by Constance Smutz

Somewhere a Melting

Ren Decatur

Somewhere in the darkness--outside
My window
Cricket friction noisily telegraphs
Waves of evening passion

Recalling interrupted
Breathing on a sleepless eve
Somewhere in the darkness -- inside
My window.

Not long ago, nor far,
In a forest glade
By fern-carpeted falls,
Love crept out of dewy
Shadows to heat warm surfaces,

To melt somewhere
Inside out
Glaciers of doubt.

Obituary

Nancy Dillingham

I watched you
die today

There was no noise
and nothing slightly personal

They just
wheeled you
out

looking rather doubtful
about
resurrection

Photo by Olin Wood

Only Picture

Roy McGinnis

The photo, his face and soul
are all gray
All I've known
of the grandfather that is one quarter me.
A poor sawmill worker
who fathered late
left with seven children
left by a wife who could not live like that anymore.
Chasing possums through the floorboards
with a shotgun.
Living on sweet potatoes
and birthing children
were too much I guess.
The photo is empty of her.
Still he smiles
in a time when few others did
and they, the seven heirs to his poverty,
smile with him.
When he died three went to the orphanage
(Poor siblings offer little help)
where they learned to find love in whatever
small measure they could.

Prelude to an Argument

Nancy Dillingham

Taste a tart retort
a crisp reply
a spicy tirade
a salty slogan
a wry riposte

Try a dash of devilry
a dollop of droll
a handful of innuendo

Pop a proverb
like a pickle
or an olive
Sop up gossip like gravy

Eat an earthy expletive
raw as escargot

Savor the mellow flavor
of a well-turned phrase
braised in irony

a heavy invective
baked, glazed in hate
calorie-laden

a healthy heaping
helping of sarcasm
steeped in sweetness
stewed in its own juices
succulent and seductive
melting like butter
in your mouth

Suck a meaty, pungent pun
stuffed with double entendre--
well-done!

Wrap a backhanded compliment
smooth and cool
bland as ice cream
around your tongue

Drool over deft funnies
crunchy and light
dipped in mischief
French-fried in malice
dusted with spite

And when you're through
sip a cup of cordiality
and try as you might
to cleanse your palate

Of Robert Lowell on Miltown
(A prepositional poem)

Sandi Goodridge

In his confessional like a priest
In dark mahogany-lined cubicle,
Under-challenged and
Over-inspired
Under-worked and
Over-paid.

Under the influence of a powerful drug
With no thoughts
Of health, or family ties
Around him he gathered poetry
With gut-spilling images
Of raw unencumbered men and women.

About this time in his life old Robert
----------drowned----------
On Miltown but came
Up screaming, spitting
Up good verses and bad
With one thing
In common--the taint
Of drug-induced perception
At last free to be
About his father's business.

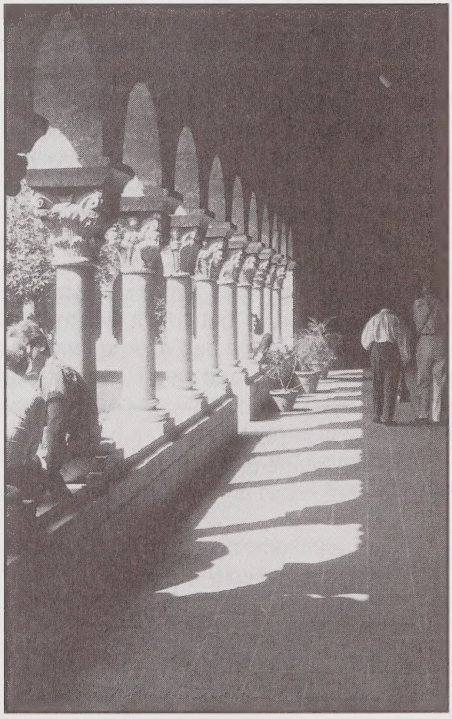


Photo by Peggy Higgins

Encounter

Peggy Higgins

I felt their eyes inching down my back before I actually met, and briefly parried, their brown gazes with a glancing thrust from my own green stare. They were the gauntlet we ran on a steamy June afternoon as we exited the mock Gothic archway of The Cloisters, John D. Rockefeller's Harlem-ringed collection of unicorn tapestries and religious relics, and made our way toward the car with its obvious out-of-state license plates. My Spanish was then almost nonexistent, but their body language alone--shifting eyes and nudging elbows--convinced me I was the conversational topic of the moment. I didn't like the feeling. Me, the exposed, pale outsider under the casual inspection of natives passing judgments with words I couldn't even understand--even if I could hear them.

It had been awhile since I had lived in the city, and I'd lost the knack for invisibility, a talent that, when well-practiced, could repel unwanted looks the way vinyl sheds water. I was drenched by the time we had walked five feet past the lookers, a young woman and two young men, heads bent toward each other as they perched on the granite retaining wall bordering the walkway. Suddenly, I was no longer a well-adjusted adult at home with her place in the world. Instead, I was thrown back in time to my freshman year in high school, long before red hair and freckles were desirable features for young girls, when only blondes had more (or any) fun. In reality, the three people examining me were probably about five years younger than I, but, for that moment, they were the all-knowing seniors rating newcomers by some unfathomable criteria that I spent the next four years trying to decipher.

My husband, a native New Yorker himself, didn't feel the looks, or maybe he just didn't care. But he also didn't mind when I hooked my arm through his. It was a casual move to an observer, but I did it with the deliberation of a medieval knight strapping on his shield just before a battle. And I used him like a shield, putting his impervious hide between their stares and me. I was just beginning to feel invulnerable when the wall sitter nearest us broke off a whispered conversation with the others and spoke directly--not to me, but to my husband.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but my wife says to tell your wife that she has beautiful hair."

Undocumented Tales of the Magnolia Building

Mary Hay Gwynn

During my years of working in the Magnolia Building on the Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College campus, I have heard some stories about the building. More than one hundred years old, the building has housed families, church personnel, and state employees.

Recently the granddaughter of one of the former owners of the house dropped by to visit. As we walked through the rooms, she related some history to me.

As a school girl, she, her brother, and her mother lived in the house with her grandfather. She boarded at Saint Genevieve of the Pines School. Her doting and eccentric grandfather bargained with the nuns at the school. If his granddaughter were allowed to leave the school to eat supper with him, he would leave the house to the Catholic Church when he died. The nuns agreed and each evening the granddaughter joined her family in the stately dining room of her grandfather's home. When her grandfather died of a heart attack while in a bathtub in the house, the property was given to the Catholic Diocese.

Death plays frequently in the house's history. This same woman told me that there are bones in the basement of the house. She knows about the bones because she and her brother saw them when they played in the basement. Perhaps the bones are from the graveyard upon which the house is built.

We do not know the cause of the fall that led to the death of the mother-in-law of one of the residents. She fell down stairs in the back of the house and broke her neck.

If the ghosts from the mother-in-law, the eccentric grandfather, the graveyard, or any of the previous inhabitants roam the premises, they mean no harm to us who currently use the house. From time to time, however, we witness evidence of their presence.

One episode occurred during the Blizzard of 1993. A campus security officer was making his rounds of the campus. At that time no one had been to the Magnolia Building since the snow had fallen. There were no tracks to the house except those of the security car. As the officer climbed from his car and gazed around the grounds, taking in the magnitude of the snow, he saw a curious sight. Circling one of the trees was a set of human-like footprints. There were no footprints leading to the tree, simply the ones circling it.

Like the footprints in the snow, history encircles the house, sometimes mysteriously. Perhaps we in the college community will become players in this history as the house embarks upon its second century.

Photo by Constance Smutz

The Guest List

Juanita Stock

"How could anyone have 170 close friends?" I asked, staring down at the guest list placed before me. I sat in the kitchen at our black formica table with Ted, my stepfather, the fingers of my left hand wedged like plastic bookmarks between the pages of my *Bride's*. Spring break at the University of Florida had brought me home to Largo to make wedding plans. I, like many eager brides-to-be, had anticipated all the preparations. I had consulted Emily Post, Amy Vanderbilt, and numerous bridal magazines in hopes of doing the "right thing."

"I don't think I appreciate your attitude," my mother responded, turning off the kitchen faucets with a vehemence that made them knock. "Why is it so impossible to think I have a lot of friends? Just because you don't, doesn't mean I don't." She swooped to get the powdered cleanser under the sink. The electric dishwasher kicked into the wash cycle. Ted shifted his bulk in his chair. "We've lived here twelve years," she continued. "Unless a person's a social hermit like you, they're bound to make a lot of friends." I winced. If we got on the subject of my social skills, I'd never win. "There's Ted's business associates. Our country club friends. The gals I play golf with." Having doused the stainless steel sink with cleanser, she ground away.

I looked at Ted. He fingered the Rhode Island Red salt shaker on the table, his jaw resting in his left palm, his blue eyes evading mine. I wondered what he was thinking. I knew he couldn't be too happy at the prospect of paying for my wedding. Although he had built his sign painting company into a business that allowed him to vacation just about anytime he wanted and to play golf three days a week, he didn't part with his money easily--particularly where I was concerned. From a previous marriage he had three daughters, for whom he never once missed his monthly child support payment. My father was a different story. He fell behind so often in his twenty dollars a month that my mother frequently had him thrown in jail. No one expected him to be at the wedding, much less to pay for it.

Bob and I wanted a modest church wedding, nothing elaborate. My circle of friends was small, Bob's nine hundred miles away. Considering Ted's probable resentment and his frugal instincts, I thought a small wedding more appropriate. One way to limit a wedding's size, according to Post and Vanderbilt, was to confine the invitations to family and close friends. My mother had directed Ted and me into the kitchen to discuss the point.

I looked at the list. I knew only about a fourth of the people on it. "Who are the Michael Bumgardeners?" I asked.

"Don't you remember them? He has the plumbing business down from Ted's shop. Ted did all his signs. We've been to their place a couple of times. Three years ago they had a great New Year's Eve party. Weren't you there?"

"Uh . . . I don't remember. Well . . . uh . . . who are the Olersons?"

"That's my osteopath and his wife."

"Oh. Emily Sonnenberg?"

"She does all the flower arrangements for the country club."

I hoped my mother was getting the point. She turned to run water in the sink.

"Larry Wallenback?"

"He's the pro at the club."

"Mom, aren't these people more like . . . acquaintances . . . than close . . . ."

"I don't have acquaintances."

"Well, how can you say these people are your close friends?"

"Are you questioning who my friends are?" She confronted me with one fist on her hip, the other hand resting on the sink top. I looked out the jalousie window at the setting sun, resting my gaze on the purple and coral clouds sailing in the sky. Ted sat, elbows on the table, rubbing the palms of his hands back and forth against his temples.

"No-o-o--I just . . . well, there's a lot of people here I don't know. Like the Packetts and the . . . ."

"Pa--ketts," she corrected.

"And Bob Waddell--why would you ask him?" Waddell was the real estate agent she had recently started working with part-time.

"Look. I'm not going to argue with you. That's who I'm going to invite and that's it."

"All these people? I don't know most of them. Neither does Bob . . ."

"So, what does that matter? You mean you don't want my friends at your wedding."

"No, that's not it."

"That's what it sounds like to me. Just because you don't know these people doesn't mean I can't invite them."

"I just thought . . . maybe we could . . . you know . . . have a smaller wedding with close friends. I'm sure Ted doesn't want to spend a fortune on this wedding and one way we could . . ."

"I think I'm a better judge of what Ted can afford than you are. I'm married to him." Ted leaned back in his chair and ran his hand up and down his chest and stomach. "You better get one thing straight. I don't have friends and then drop them. You might, but I don't." She punctuated her point by turning her attention to the black enamel cupboards.

I felt defeated. I couldn't win. I realized my social shortcomings only too well. I might have known she would start attacking them. "I was only hoping we could have a smaller wedding."

She plunged the dishrag under the hot water again, wrung every drop of excess water from it, and swatted back a lock of hair with her wrist. "And just who were you planning on inviting?"

"Well, Faye and Judy . . . Cynthia and Margaret . . . ."

"That's all? You never did have many friends. As I always told you, 'You've got to be a friend to have a friend.'"

"Well, I've been away at school. I've lost touch with people. But couldn't we cut out some of these people?"

"Who? Who would we trim? Look at the list. Who can I leave out?"

"You should know that better than I. This is such a special time in our lives. I want to share it with people I know and not a lot of strangers . . . ."

"They're not strangers to me. Why should you feel uncomfortable simply because you don't know them? My friends are the type who would want to share in the joy of seeing my only daughter get married."

I felt guilty now, but torn.

"As far as money goes, if you're really concerned abut expenses, we can have the ceremony at the country club and then we won't have to pay for the church."

"No, Bob wouldn't . . . ."

"Hell, there you go again. Insisting on what you or Bob want. I'm paying for this. I should have some say. I don't see what's wrong with having the wedding at the Bellaire Country Club. There's lots of room. Particularly if you don't want a large wedding. We'd be right there for the reception. What church were you thinking of having it in?"

"Peace Memorial in Clearwater."

"That big church! If you want a small wedding, why have it there? We could have a nice ceremony at the country club."

"Bob would really object." I could picture his reaction if I told him we were going to get married on a golf course.

"Why?"

"Well, because he thinks we should get married in a church. He has strong feelings about it."

"What difference does it make where you get married? The ceremony shouldn't matter."

"He just wouldn't like it at all. And that's another thing. I forgot to tell you. He doesn't want the punch spiked."

"Well, isn't that just fine. Bob gets to tell me what he wants, but I have to pay for it. What else does he want?"

"Nothing. He just feels real strong about those two things."

A long pause ensued while my mother slammed a few cabinet doors.

"That's just fine. But he isn't the only one involved in this. *I'm* paying for the wedding . . . and reception . . . and I should have some say as to what goes on."

"Maybe Jenny has a point," said Ted. Maybe we could cut the guest list to fewer people."

"Oh . . . so you're in on this too. My only child gets married and I can't give her the kind of wedding I want without everyone objecting. Excuse me for living."

"You don't have to be like that, Ruth. The kids just want a small wedding."

"Yeah. And how am I going to face the people I don't invite? Tell me that. I'd be ashamed. I wouldn't be able to show my face. What a fine wedding this is going to be."

"I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't mean to upset you."

"God! You don't think of anybody but yourself and what you want. Am I to blame for wanting to give you a nice wedding?"

"I really appreciate it, Mom. . . ."

"It just could be smaller," interjected Ted.

"How? I don't see how. Do you realize how embarrassing it will be to have to try to tell people why I couldn't invite them to your wedding? I don't know what I'd say. 'Sorry, you're not a good enough friend to come to my daughter's wedding.' Do you

realize what you're asking me to do? Christ! Why do you always have to have your way? My daughter is getting married and she doesn't want anybody to know. You've gotten me so upset I feel like going in that bedroom and taking that gun in there and shooting myself."

"Mother. Please. Don't talk like that."

"I mean it. That's what I feel like doing." She threw the washrag into the sink. She stormed off to the bedroom, slamming the door so it shook the house.

"Oh, God!"

I looked at Ted. He sat there. "That's just the way she gets," he said. I went to my mother's bedroom door. "Mom, please . . . I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Please forgive me. I just don't know what to do. I want to make you happy, but Bob has his ideas too. Can't we work something out?"

She opened the bedroom door. "Okay," she said. "We can work something out. Here's the way it's going to be. And I don't want any argument. You can get married in Peace Memorial Church. You can have your small wedding. We'll have just family. No one else. No friends. Nobody. Only family. And I don't want to hear any complaints later. It's settled." She brushed past me to go to the living room. "That's it. I've made up my mind, and that's the way it's going to be."

"You mean we're not going to invite anybody but family? I can't have any friends?"

"Nope, I can't invite mine. You can't invite yours. My mind's made up."

I went to the kitchen and picked up *Bride's*. I put it in the magazine rack. I knew all I needed to know about planning this wedding.

Weavings

S. Suzann Moffitt

"C-R-E-A-K. . ."
Moans the old, wooden rocker
My grandmother sways to and fro
As she sits and talks--

Talks of many things--
Things of the future, present, and
The Past.
I sit enthralled--
Becoming a strand in the tapestry
She weaves.

I see my mother as a young girl,
Coal-black hair in pigtails, rosy cheeks,
  sparkling blue eyes,
Running, laughing, playing. . .
A glimmer of the woman I now know.

I see the pasture full of flowers--
Daisies, Queen Anne's lace, dandelions,
Not the dusty, rocky road on which cars now speed.

I hear the low rumble of the creek
And the chirps of the crickets and katydids,
The music of nature--not of horns and engines.

I feel the cool, tickling, green grass
As it soothes my bare feet,
Now hot and blistered
From the shiny asphalt.

I slowly step out of the tapestry,
Picking off stray threads as I sit,
Still entranced, in front of the rocker.

The antique clock strikes--
Bringing me out of my reverie,
And I must leave.

My grandmother stops her rocking
As we exchange kisses,
Hers on a smooth, round cheek,
Mine on a wrinkled, weathered one.

And as I step down off the porch,
I wonder if the "creak" I hear
Is her rocker
Or the floor underneath.

Pen and ink by Constance Smutz

Skydiving

Nancy Dillingham

Free-falling
through life
is too easy

I'd rather float
with a discerning eye
earning my eternity

than to arrive
surprised
in paradise

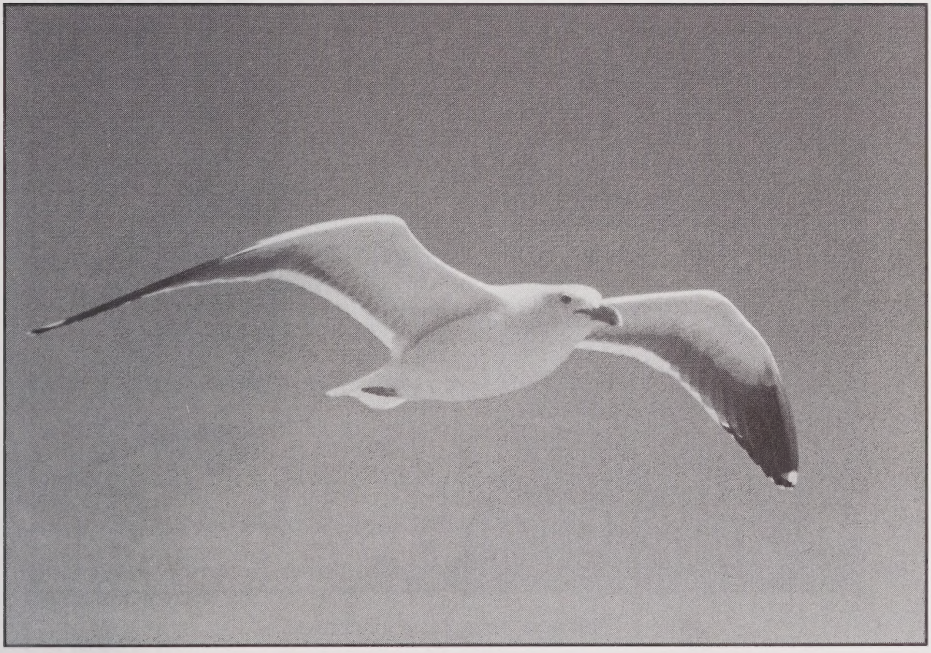


Photo by Olin Wood

Pen and ink by Lisa Johnson

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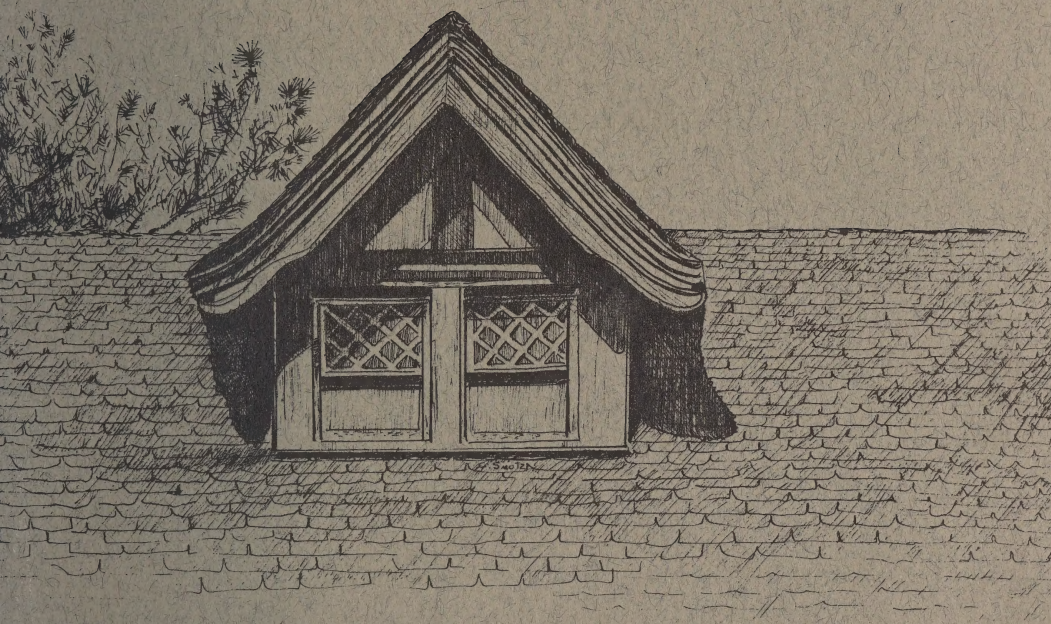
With this issue, *Victoria Press* broadens its scope to include contributions from neighboring community colleges and from established writers with local ties. We thank each contributor and especially poet and novelist Robert Morgan.



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Cover drawing by Constance M. Smutz of a window in the Sunnicrest Building.

Photo by Olin Wood

On the Wing

Fred Chappell

Through plexiglass abraded to a mist of rainbows
I observe the motor housing five feet away.
Its underside reflects the airline logo,
Red and yellow, as the bullet shape pulls forward.

The black propeller cone possesses a shadow
That I interpret as the whirling propeller,
The invisible screw that tightens me turn by turn
Against the destination my ticket foretells.

All below, the usual human evidence:
Fields plowed beige, black roads through forests, barns
And parking lots. From twenty thousand feet
That landscape is idyllic, the one imagined
Four generations past and then preserved
In the book in the musty armoire seldom opened.

The wing of riveted plates sweeps over the land,
Trolling its shadow for a farmer's upward glance.
I am contained in this shadow that cuts across the fields,
The cars and waters, but can see no shadow myself,
Being so securely removed by height
And the second glass of bourbon. Whatever fancies
I entertain of air or earth are rebuked
By the central wingplate's painted instruction.
NO STEP, it says, as if expecting me to take one.

Caring,

Sharing,

Loving,

Cajoling,

I am,

You are,

Teacher

And Student,

We both

ARE.

Teresa Dee Kennedy
1996-1997 Instructor of the Year
Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College

Dancing with Ginger

Peggy Higgins

His teeth were outlined in gold, the way sunlight outlines a gray cloud. They were the first things I noticed when he leaned forward across our shared dinner table and smiled largely at me. The second were his neon blue irises, glowing hotly amid the pink-veined whites of eyes permanently bloodshot. Then his mouth opened, and a landslide of Russian words overlaid with vodka fumes rolled over me and mowed down my own carefully prepared stock of phrases the way a bush hog clears out an overgrown woodlot. The one thing that needed no translation was the smile. I returned it at only half-wattage, not knowing what I might be tacitly agreeing to with only a facial expression. Other vacationing Russians at nearby tables, seeing my predicament, (and wanting to practice their own English) leaned toward us cosily and translated.

"Alexei Andreyovich wants to know are you married," explained one, his face bathed in goodwill and sweat.

Thinking my dinner companion had not noticed the ring on my left hand, I nodded and replied, "Da, da."

"Why, then, do you travel alone?" was the next thrust.

I parried with an attempt to explain my temporary job as visiting English instructor at the local university in Sochi. They all looked at me: volunteer translators, my table companion, and anyone else within hearing range with a passing acquaintance of English, with equal mixtures of pity and disbelief.

"Why your husband does not worry about you?" My table mate persisted, a la go-between.

"Why should he?" I countered. "The sanitorium is protected by walls and a gate, and should I not feel safe in Sochi?"

What could he, or they, say? Russia--in its former incarnation as the USSR and now in its 1992 Russia persona--had prided itself on low crime rates, especially when compared to its former foe--the US. But my compliment to the Motherland was taken for what it was, a holding action until I could decently abandon the monochromatic food on my plate and exit through the 1960s-style modern doors of the multi-level Sanitoria Zapolaria dining hall. Diverted from a frontal assault, my new acquaintances focused on my eating habits; I wasn't doing enough eating and, by unspoken rebuke, was wasting superior quality food.

"I ate a large lunch," I explained, weakly, even to my own ears.

More disapproving looks overlaid with smiles, but at least it gave me a way to escape. I avoided the dining hall for the next few days, drinking pots of Earl Grey in my room and wolfing down caviar sandwiches at the little coffee shop near school. But my private stash of tea couldn't last forever and neither could my supply of rubles, and, besides, my Scottish soul balked at the thought that I wasn't taking advantage of the meals I was entitled to (no matter how bad). In a week I was planning forays back into the public eating arena with an eye toward avoiding my assigned table companion. At least, I thought, I could sneak in early and grab a couple of rolls, maybe a grayish meatball with what passed for mashed potatoes. It was amazing how the passage of time (and some healthy hunger pangs) turned a formerly unappetizing menu into something I looked forward to with mouth-watering anticipation.

No sooner did I slip--what I thought was unobtrusively--into my chair at the table than I saw Alexei Andreyovich appear in the doorway at the far end of the dining room. Our eyes met and quickly slid away as we spotted each other across the masticating crowd. I had a wild urge to grab what food I could from the table and make a break for it, but, before I could carry out my desperate plan, I looked back toward the door and saw my nemesis ducking back down the steps. Amazing! He wanted to avoid contact as much as I did. But, rather than feeling relieved, I felt guilty. How to fix the problem, allowing my tablemate to eat his meals in peace, and, at the same time, saving myself from unintelligible advances?

The next afternoon, as I walked back to my room after class, I saw Alexei Andreyovich strolling along the sidewalk ahead of me. On an impulse, I put on a short burst of speed and overtook him, slowing down just in time to make it seem, I hoped, as though the encounter were by chance. I smiled as casually as I could manage and said, "Dobriy dyenny," hoping he would think it a good afternoon, too. Again, the sun-breaking-through-the-clouds smile as he returned, "Good afternoon."

Great, I thought, friendly, but not too friendly. He should take the hint and I can go back to the dining room without looking over my shoulder all the time.

It was with relief that I sat down at my usual table that evening. I was just working my way through a plate of what looked like ground beef and red cabbage when Alexei Andreyovich pulled out the chair across from me and sat down.

As he leaned toward me, I noticed something clutched in the sausage-like fingers of his right hand. It didn't look like a weapon, but I eyed him suspiciously all the same. He placed the hand carefully on the table next to my plate, and when he withdrew it, there on the gravy-stained cloth lay a gleaming white egg, a peace offering that needed no translation. The question he asked, however, did. The only thing I caught from the stream of vaguely English sounding words was some reference to "cinema."

"I beg your pardon," I said.

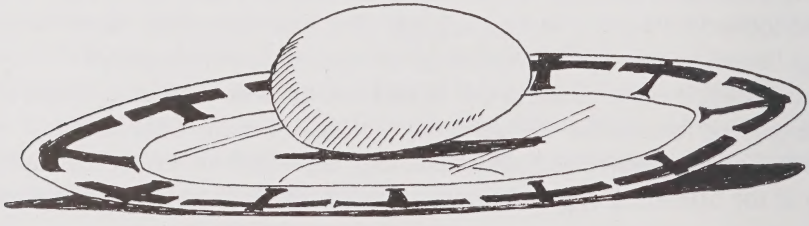
"You like go to American cinema tonight?" he repeated with painstaking slowness.

I could see I faced a double dilemma: how to handle an unwanted gift and an unwanted invitation without turning a shared dining table into a Cold War zone. I was mentally scrabbling for a solution to those problems. I was also more than a little annoyed that my would-be suitor thought he could win my affections so cheaply. Even during the war, so I had heard, a girl could have looked forward to some stockings or at least chocolate. Since when had eggs become an acceptable exchange for an evening's company? Fortunately, it wasn't hard to call in that last-ditch defense so beloved by beleaguered females from Manhattan to Minsk. I really DID have a headache. I explained as I simultaneously deposited my crumpled napkin on top of the offending egg and slithered out of my chair on my bee-line path

toward the door and freedom. Like Scarlett O'Hara, an early heroine of mine, I'd think about a way out of the predicament "tomorrow."

I fled the dining hall and speed walked up the path, out the gate past the bored gatekeeper and caught the next bus into downtown Sochi, where I found an unoccupied table at my old standby coffeehouse and gratefully dug into a plate of caviar sandwiches washed down by strong, sweet Turkish coffee. By the time I finished eating, I had a plan. Luckily, the groundwork was already laid for my permanent escape. I would simply plead a heavy workload: essays, tests to grade, whatever I needed to build a paperwork safety barrier around me until Alexei Andreyovich's vacation was over and he returned to whatever gulag he had come from.

I was in a much better mood waiting for the bus returning to the Sanitoria Zapolaria than I had been when I departed there less than two hours before. I would be free without international incident! I floated down the hill, through the gate and into my building, hardly noticing my surroundings at all. That is, until I got to the television alcove on the hall where my room was located. At first, I thought it was deserted because all the lamps were dark. Then I noticed the moon-like glow from the television screen, playing to an audience of one. Alexei Andreyovich sat mesmerized by the fluid movements of Fred Astaire as he glided across the screen. Then, while I watched but tried not to watch, the Russian rose from his seat and began wildly spinning and turning across the small square of linoleum, a lonely Fred dancing with a phantom Ginger. I don't think he heard the small click as I unlocked my door and ducked into my room. I never saw him again, and I've never again seen an egg of such gleaming whiteness as the one he placed so carefully beside my plate.



Drawing by Richard Croom

Seasons

Lee Ann Hodges

I will say good-bye to summer's
heat upon my back; and
I can say good-bye to tastes of
sweet, new-fallen apples, warm from
basking in sunrays. I'll look over my
shoulder at rusty bikes and swings that
stiffen in joints unused.

I can even welcome autumn
with its changing colors, dreadful
shedding. These can I accept and even
find a certain pleasure in. But
do not ask me to open my
arms to winter, cov'ring all with
false softness, cov'ring bones of
trees stripped clean of flesh.

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

The Atheist's Garden

Tom Rash

Up until 1975, when I went off to college and she went back to teaching, my mother almost always got up one hour before the rest of us to fix a country breakfast of eggs, bacon, biscuits, and oatmeal, a reassuring ritual signaled each morning by the pre-dawn rattling of pots and pans. The days, then, when this routine was broken, were few but noteworthy, for coming down to cold cereal meant that my mother was either very sick or very angry.

And so it was that on a warm spring morning during my junior year in high school I came down to Shredded Wheat and the realization that all was not right in my world. My mom said nothing to me, my brother, or my sister. We all sat down, uneasy and wary. The tension in the room was enough to make me not want to eat, and, adding to this feeling, was the unsweetened, strawlike cereal that lay in soggy lumps in my bowl.

The minutes before my dad appeared dragged on as we became more and more aware of our own chewing and swallowing. Finally, I could take it no more. "Hey Mom," I said from behind the box, "did the government grant us grazing rights for this stuff?" No reply, just a cold stare and a slight turn of the head.

To everyone's relief, Dad finally shuffled up the steps, head down, typically oblivious to anything that was not to be eaten or read. His socks were different colors, and the sole of his right shoe flapped open, almost like a second mouth positioned to catch the crumbs that fell as he tried to read and eat at the same time. My mom clearly wanted my dad to notice her frustration, but this was asking too much of a man who would do anything (including feigning deafness) to avoid confrontation and dispute.

As usual, no one mentioned my dad's absentminded assembly of brown pants, green shirt, and purple tie, colors seen together only on certain Amazonian reptiles. He made a mumbling, resigned move for the door. Three seconds moreand he would have been on his way to his usual counter seat at the Snak Shak, the restaurant whose B sanitation rating warded off my mom like a plague cross. But my mom's voice was too urgent to ignore.

"Jim," my mom intoned, " I'm going to cancel the newspaper today."

"Why, honey?" my father halfheartedly asked, his hopes for coffee and a fried apple pie now dashed.

"Because," my mom sputtered, "they have gone too far this time. This is Freeman's third letter in three months, and I cannot believe that the editor, a deacon at First Baptist in Shelbyville, would allow the ranting of this godless man to be printed for every young person in the county to see."

At first my dad merely nodded at my mother. However, when my mom started jabbing at the editorial page in a wordless tirade, Dad began to try to calm her down. And she did calm down, for it was not in her generally agreeable nature to be too hard on people. Her dark mood lifted slowly, however.

When the morning's drama had ended and my hungry and subdued father had gone off to teach, I came back downstairs to see if I could find the letter that had so upset my mom. Surprisingly, the paper was still on the table. I quickly and quietly turned to the editorial page and scanned the letters to the editor. I stopped at the heading "Atheist Questions God's Justice" and read:

> Last Thursday, May 14, a series of powerful storms rumbled through the Carolinas. In one small town a tornado touched down, destroying a mobile home and killing the family inside, including a little girl of three. My question to all of the Christians in Shelbyville is where was god on May 14? On May 14 did god lose control of his creation? If so, he is not omnipotent and cannot be god. If, however, he was in control and just decided on that day that an innocent child would die, then he is far from the omnibenevolent being of Christian mythology.
>
> Almost to a person, the Christians that I have met have been incapable of answering the hard questions of their faith. If the death of this girl was not a capricious, callous and cruel act, then what was it? An act of love? Of mercy? Long ago I gave up believing in god, primarily because I realized that to do so was to escape life's many troubles by thinking only of what is to be and not what is and to miss what is beautiful and good about life. We must, I feel, live honest lives, accepting that life is a struggle and that we persevere nevertheless. "Cultivate your garden," the great French atheist said; I choose to do just that.

I slowly reread the letter and, dazed, went upstairs to finish getting ready for school. The letter troubled me all day. I couldn't stop thinking about what I had never before dare imagine: a world with no God. For sixteen years I had lived in the certainty of a solidly Christian home, and now all that I had taken for granted had been called into question. Most troubling for me was the nature of my mom's belief. She and her faith were inseparable; she seemed as certain of God as I was that one heartbeat would follow another.

To compound my problems, I had recently, and belatedly, begun dating, thus deepening the mystery of a life that, just months before, was carefree and simple. For a month now, I had been trying to get up the nerve to ask Jenny Ross out to eat and to play Putt Putt, an activity with which, unlike dancing, I felt I actually might

be able to impress her. The problem was that Jenny was an old friend, and I was afraid to cross that confusing line between dating and just getting together, fearing that a night of nervous, ill-timed laughter and uncomfortable silences would humiliate us both.

But, try as I might, during hours of pacing rehearsal, I could not convince myself not to do it. The receiver slipped in my clammy hand when I finally brought it to my ear. At first, I could hear only my rushing blood when I tilted my head towards the earpiece. I was saved from total panic by a reassuringly friendly "hello." We talked for a few minutes, and I found myself once again charmed by Jenny's lilting voice.

Too soon, however, I snapped back to the scary reality of the moment and half-blurted out something about pizza and Putt-Putt on Friday night. She laughed and said sure, but then asked who else would be going. "No one else," I stammered. She was quiet for too long. My hand began trembling. What was she thinking? Was I assuming too much? Perhaps she had never thought of me as anything but a good friend, someone to shoot ball with, to borrow records from, to hang around the Snak Shak with, playing the same worn records over and over on the barely audible juke box. But then she asked me what time she should be ready, words she had never spoken quite like that before.

After hanging up the phone I went downstairs to join my father in the den. Although the TV was on, my father was, as usual, deep into a book. His large oak desk was stacked a foot high with tests, grade books, slides, and art books. The pile had the solidity of a New England stone fence; the papers and books never fell, no matter how absentmindedly my father searched through them. Entering conversation with him at such times was not easy; my mom had given up years before and now contented herself with a morse code of short and long grunts. Tonight, however, I was content to sit in silence, as my father contemplated the glories of ancient Greece and I, the mysteries of God and girls.

The week dragged by, but Friday, when it finally came, brought surprising concerns. For the first time in my life I worried about how I smelled. I couldn't decide how liberally to splash on the Brut cologne that had sat unopened on my dresser since last Christmas. And I combed my hair several different ways before deciding that all I had to do was make sure that my oversized ears were hidden.

By the time I reached Jenny's door, however, I had come to dread her dad's small talk more than anything else about the evening. Whereas my dad mumbled his way through his days, Mr. Ross spoke crisply, snapping off his words like the rap of a teacher's ruler. He was a humorless engineer who was much given to dispensing career advice with an aphoristic ease. Mr. Ross knew my father, but the two were so different that their conversations always made me think of cheap

horror films and the futile efforts of the conscientious man of science to talk to the alien who is only a few minutes away from eating its first human.

Tonight, thankfully, Mr. Ross was preoccupied with some plumbing problem and gave only a perfunctory greeting as he waved me to the couch and went back into the kitchen to continue his labors. I had expected Jenny to be right behind her father, but was surprised to hear that she would be down in a minute. I began to worry that I had, as usual, not made myself clear, and that Jenny would come sweeping down the stairs in a prom dress. The effect, however, when she did step quietly into the room could not have been greater if she had been wearing a formal gown, for her light-blue sundress, white sandals, gold necklace and earrings were iridescent against her brown hair, eyes, and skin. It was the first time that I had seen her wear make-up, and, as she said "hello," I caught the first hint of her perfume.

My intoxication only heightened when she turned her back and I saw the square of tanned skin framed by the cut in her dress. I almost reached out to touch the gentle curve of her shadowed shoulder blades but was abruptly snapped to by Mrs. Ross's "Have a good time, you two. Be back by eleven." My reverie broken, I followed Jenny out to the car, both confused and aroused by a girl I'd last seen wearing cut-offs and shooting basketball.

Jenny tried to make small talk, but I was too numb to reply. I drove on into the cooling spring night unsure of how to break the embarrassing silence. I could think of nothing else to do except to concentrate intently on my driving.

As we slowed at the junction of highways 21 and 18, however, Jenny stirred. I perked up, too, hoping to encourage any comment that might break the interminable silence. When she did speak, I was so intent on her words that I did not understand what she had said. I asked her to repeat it. "Isn't that the atheist's garden?" she asked. "You know, the man who writes those strange letters to the paper." For a few seconds it just didn't make sense. I had ridden by this garden hundreds of times and, more than once, had heard someone comment on its varied flowers, fruits, and vegetables. "The nicest garden in the county," a friend's parent had once said, and, looking closely at the garden, as I now did for the first time, it was easy to see how someone could believe that. The luxuriant, multicolored plants flowed down the gentle slope of the hill, yet, within this lushness, there was also order, imposed through the strict geometry of a series of fences and wires.

This whole night was rapidly overwhelming me. To my confused feelings for Jenny were now added further questions about the atheist gardener and my mom's unshakable faith. The more I thought the more the paradox grew. How could a man who scorned God have the nicest garden in the county, possibly in the state? As we entered Shelbyville's city limits, I found myself squinting to read the small sign that pointed to the restaurant, almost as if some clue might be found, or even an answer, perhaps, to just one of the many questions now confronting me.

I almost stumbled going around to open Jenny's door. She noticed that I was distracted and asked if something were bothering me. I didn't want her to think that I regretted asking her out, so I smiled and joked that I was weak with hunger. Once inside, it did not take long for Jenny's good-natured humor to lighten my mood. I forgot the troubling garden long enough to enjoy the meal and the three games of Putt-Putt we later played. On the way home, however, as we passed the dark garden, my small talk became almost urgent as I tried to ward off the disturbing questions its existence raised. We got to Jenny's house none too soon, for I wanted nothing more than to get back to the restless seclusion of my room. I don't think that I would have tried to kiss Jenny that first night anyway, but it was now out of the question. I walked her to the door, said goodnight, and turned to walk away. "Goodnight, I had fun," she almost whispered. "Goodnight," I replied. But I could not bear to turn and look at her.

I managed to get through the next few weeks, although thoughts of God, Mom, the atheist and his garden, and Jenny continually mingled, distracting me so much that my parents and teachers thought that I might be sick. And I was, after all, sick, both of finding myself suddenly facing certain questions with a deathbed urgency and of not talking with Jenny simply because I couldn't stand to contemplate the change in our relationship. I had not spoken to her since our date except to mumble "hello," evading her puzzled eyes.

However, events at school brought some of my concerns to a head. Senior Day at our school was the one day in four years of buzzer-and-bell regimentation that a student was deemed rational enough to make an important decision, although the seniors rarely took the task too seriously. Every year, of course, the class would vote to have someone come talk with them about sex. The first hour of these sessions involved a too-earnest attempt by some doctor to lower himself to the level of high-school seniors. Derisive hoots greeted the stupid jokes and outdated films favored by these speakers, and rubber models of the male and female sex organs inevitably elicited laughs of either familiarity or surprise. But the real fun always came with the question-and-answer session, the educational benefits of which were quickly forgotten as the session turned into a contest to see who could ask the most bizarre question.

The afternoon program was attended with much less enthusiasm, focusing as it usually did on either higher education or employment opportunities, especially careers in textiles. The uninspiring businessmen and counselors who led these sessions believed in simplistic overheads and the self-fulfillment awaiting anyone lucky enough to work in a mill. Occasionally, however, the seniors would make an inspired choice for the afternoon talks, and so it was that Mr. Freeman came to be invited to school to talk with us about atheism in the Bible Belt.

Somehow, and no one is quite sure how it happened, this selection cleared the first faculty review of speakers, but soon the

principal used his administrative veto to kill the choice. The seniors roused themselves from their end-of-the year torpor long enough to mount a spirited protest, but our principal knew that no community so dominated by Baptists would ever allow an atheist to give a school-sanctioned talk on atheism. The veto stood.

My mom, of course, was shocked when she heard about this controversy. For years she had expressed concern about the wisdom of having high-school seniors meet as a group to listen to a stranger talk to them about sex, but she had contained her concern this side of anger. This latest matter, however, was different, for this man's belief called into question all that my mom, her church, and the community believed in. "That's two hundred souls imperiled every minute that man speaks, no matter what he is talking about," she said, and my brother and my dad, who was already heading for a book, didn't dare contradict her. I, however, felt contentious and in a shaking and high-pitched voice accused her of being close-minded.

My dad no longer bothered confronting my mom, and with the prom coming up she had too much leverage on my sister. My brother just didn't care. I was out there alone. I erred in not feeling my way into the argument, but I was mad, too. My mom listened for several minutes to my sputtering declaration that seventeen year olds were mature enough to listen to an atheist without automatically becoming atheists themselves. "And," I added, "a little questioning might even make some people's faith that much stronger. Look at ..."

I didn't get to finish my sentence. Mom was narrowing her eyes at me in a way that made even my dad notice. "Son," he said, refocusing as he slowly came up out of his professorial fog, "your mother isn't calling for unexamined faith, but she feels that seniors in high school are too impressionable, too prone to do what is fashionable to honestly evaluate this man's words."

"Dad," I countered, "if you don't expose them to it now, while they are still with their parents and in their community, they will be exposed to it in college where it really is fashionable."

"Son," my dad continued, "seniors in high school might see the fact that this man was allowed to speak as proof that this belief is in some way legitimate."

My mom wasn't listening to me or my dad. At first she was too mad to speak, for which I was glad, but too soon for me she calmed down enough to begin to rebut what I had felt was a carefully reasoned argument. There was a disconcerting edge to her voice. "Young man," she said, "let me tell you one thing. You think that you are being logical, and that I am being irrational and blinded by my belief. But I saw you reading that letter the other day, and I bet that you liked the fact that Freeman quoted Voltaire. But let me tell you one thing about Voltaire. He died screaming in agony, the agony of the realization that pride and vanity had kept him from seeing the beloved truth that he so often championed. He died in agony, Son, realizing that he now faced an eternity of separation from the one source of hope,

happiness, love...." The word "love" trailed off of her lips, for what had begun as an angry refutation had turned into more of a plea. My mom had begun crying, and she now stepped past me and walked upstairs to her bedroom.

I was stunned. I knew that my dad would go up to Mom soon, but first he turned to me, trying to gauge how I felt. "You know how your mother feels about religion, Son. It scares her to see you even starting to question her faith and, in her eyes at least, endangering your own salvation. Nothing worries her more."

I, too, was very upset now, but I didn't want my brother and sister to see how shaken I was. I got up from the table, grabbed my basketball, and dribbled up the drive and onto the road. Taking a left turn, I instinctively headed towards Jenny's house, reaching the curb of her walk before remembering that I couldn't turn to her. So I headed towards the park.

As I neared the playground, the nimbus of the court's one light softened into the damp night air. At the light's margins, moths fluttered. I stepped onto the court, stripped off my shirt, and flipped the ball towards the bent rim and tattered net. The comforting routine of shooting, rebounding, and dribbling quickly dissipated much of my frustration. After a few shots, I was unaware of the ball in my hands, its rhythms--the clustering staccatos of jump shots and measured cadences of free throws--sending out an echoing morse into the night's emergent sounds.

After two hours, I finally sat down to rest, sharp-breathed and slippery with sweat. It was only then that I began once again to think about the past few days in my life. I was more confused than I had ever been, but what really bothered me was the dawning realization that my life was never going to be simple again. As confused as I was, however, I knew that I needed to go back and apologize to my mom. I scooped up my ball and headed home to one of the few certainties left in my life: my mother's love, which, for that night at least, was comfort enough.

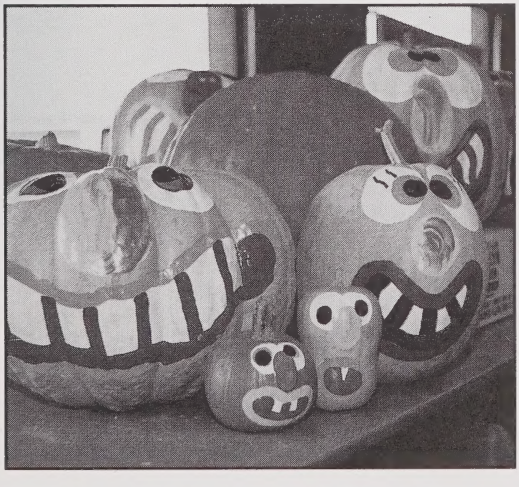


Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

The Question Meow

Wayne Robbins

In the middle of others, the hopeless, the
helpless, the somebody help me, the

let me go outside, the feed me please, all of the
wails through the bedroom door,

comes a dip to the sky of voice,
half-moon of air and then suddenly

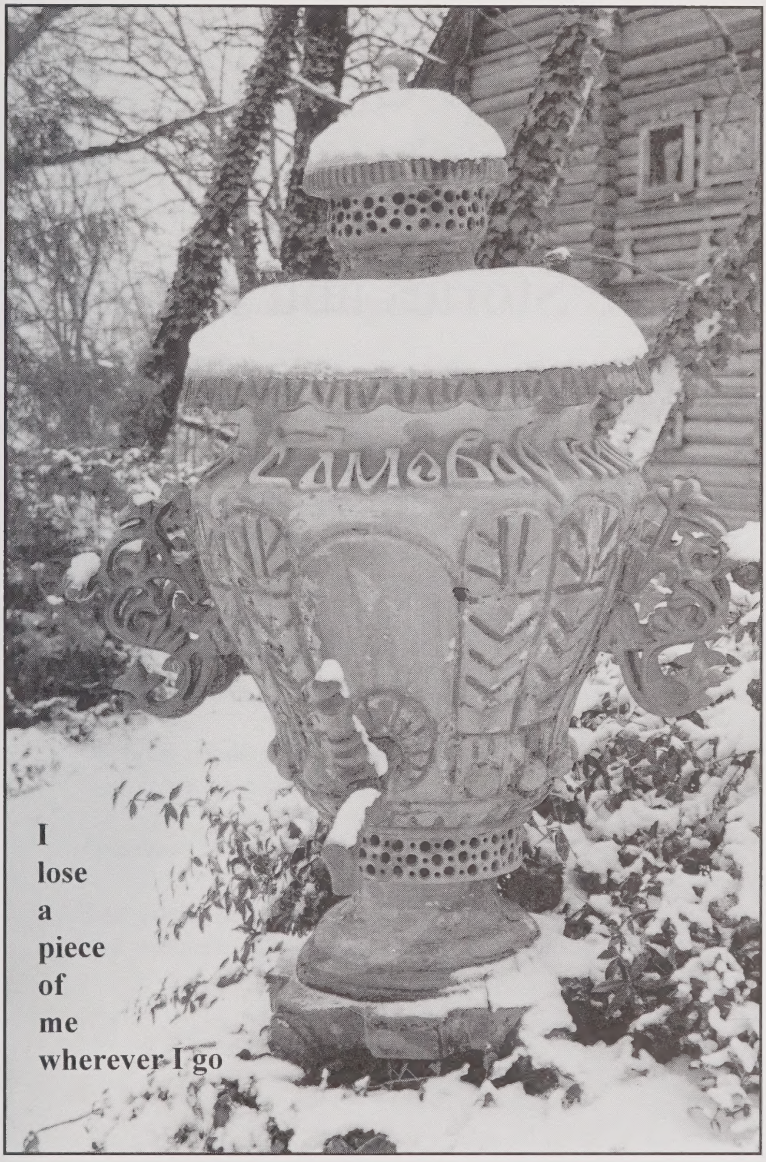
everything up to this point
is in question.

A Fingernail in Pittsboro, NC

Wayne Robbins

Untitled Photo

Peggy Higgins



This issue features

New Ground

The Stories and Poems

of

Nancy Dillingham

Funeral

Nancy Dillingham

The sun was so hot
even the plastic flowers looked wilted.

"Isn't it a lovely day for a funeral?"

The angry fist in my chest
beat against my best Sunday dress.

"I love the view from here."

. . .

Aunt Pallie is dead, Daddy said.
We went to pay our respects.

"She looks like she could speak."

I remember Uncle Jeff in a rocker,
his features stone, light catching on his bald head,

his bony hands moldy onion skin
with large, blue-black veins.

"He won't live long without her."

I sat on the bed near the casket
and wondered where Aunt Pallie's legs were.

Some Traveling Music, Please

Nancy Dillingham

You sit on your side
marking your territory,
one arm thrown carelessly out the window,
resting on the rolled-down glass,
the other barely touching the steering wheel,
moving it magically.

I admire your profile,
tough, browned, and handsome,
but I wouldn't want to say so.
I've learned this about you:
You'd rather things were left unsaid
and, sometimes, consider talking a slight.

I suppose I like that about you--
one doesn't have to shout;
still, given half the chance,
I'd like to have your eyes linger
rather than glance.

A little traveling music, babe, you say.
I flip on the radio,
and forward we fly
into the darkness together
as night settles.

Forbidden Fruit

Nancy Dillingham

The heat bangs off the dark blue and white Humko lard buckets as she swings them back and forth in either hand. Beyond the paved road, the now-shaded, powder-dry path leads into the woods. She walks along the path until she comes to an opening leading to a meadow-like field. Eden-like, it is a new world filled with clumps of forbidden fruit, for this is government property. But the wild strawberries are ripe, and everyone knows that the park ranger is not at home in the mornings.

The berries smell sweet and hang in heavy clusters. Their oblong shapes seem stretched to fullness leaving a slightly whitened neck under the cap. They are particularly large for wild strawberries, and she and her mother come here each year to pick them for fresh pies and jam. After much begging and cajoling, she has persuaded her mother to let her come alone for just this one time. The earth is loamy, and the air is damply hot. Protected by their leaves and small, dry sticks, the berries are coated with a fine mist, like frost.

It is immensely quiet, and the first berries fall with small thumps into the bucket as she picks, lifting the vines, being careful not to step on ripe berries as she moves from one corner of the field to the center. She fills one of the two gallon buckets and, except for an occasional twig snapping as she steps and a hummingbird whirring in sudden intervals, hears only the soft grass move under her feet. She no longer hears the intermittent, shrill cry and drone of the sawmill in the valley below.

She is hot now and sits under a tree at the edge of the patch. Her hat is wet, and, as she takes it off, some hair, lightened by the sun, falls

around her neck. She sets the bucket of berries carefully on a flat rock in the shade of the tree. She pries the top off the other bucket, which she has left under the tree, and eats. The cornbread is fat and cold, and the onions are small and fresh, their tops stubby and green where they have been chopped off. She grinds them into a mound of salt which she has poured from a piece of folded waxed paper onto the bucket's lid.

When she is finished eating, she smooths the remaining salt into a flat, round circle on the lid and scrawls her initials in it. Then she abruptly flings it away, dusts out the lid, claps her hands together to get rid of the salt, and jumps up. A small, pale-blue butterfly zigzags in her path and lights on the bucket of berries. She catches it and, holding it gently between thumb and forefinger, carries it away from the tree into the sun and throws it forward and upward. Fly away, little butterfly, she says and goes back for her hat and the now-empty other bucket.

When the second bucket is filled, she turns from the silence of the field and the converging, small paths of parted vines and grass where she has picked. Her eyes catch the flash of red, like a bird, darting across the opening to the woods. She walks towards it. The red moves as she moves, suddenly filling up the opening. Unafraid, she continues to walk, her eyes fixing on the red shirt with sleeves rolled up over the elbows of brown arms then moving downward to blue work pants rolled at the top of hard, cracked boots. Her eyes are drawn upward again to the burst of red, then slowly to the eyes in the face above. She stops, turns and moves again towards the tree where she drops her bucket and sits propped against the trunk. From beneath the brim of her hat, she looks at the opening. She then lies down on her back and puts her hands under her head. A bird flaps its wings, and she looks up as it lights in a nest in the corner of the second branch above. In a moment, it flies again. She traces the branches in the sky above her. A cloud catches on one of them and appears to break into a head. The dismembered body floats away in the other direction. She floats on the cloud.

Suddenly a twig snaps, and she hears the soft grass moving. As her eyes turn to the field again, the red shirt moves. The body treads heavily through one of her paths, twigs snapping under the boots. She

sits up again and feels him looking down at her. She closes her eyes and opens them again to meet his, intense and shining. She smiles and reaches her hand over to the side of her and offers him the juicy berry she has set on a small rock--the largest, the best of the lot, her souvenir. He bites into it slowly, and she hears the sucking sound as he takes the juice from it. He finishes the berry while she watches, looking at him intently yet innocently, like a child. Then she gets up and straightens her hat, takes the two lard buckets, one in each hand, and starts walking away. He follows, looking puzzled. They both walk out of the forbidden place into the bright sun glaring off the small, shiny rocks on either side of the road. He rights a beat-up, dusty motorcycle and takes the two buckets and hangs one on each handle bar. He steers it through the path out of the woods. He hauls himself onto the machine and jumps it to life with the quick motion of one big, cracked boot. The cycle sputters, catches, and roars. He motions with his head for her to get on behind him. Unhesitatingly, she moves and holds on.

As they roar around the curve, off the graveled road, onto the pavement, she hears again the rasping drone of the sawmill, punctuated at precise intervals with a shrill whine as the saw moves through the logs.

About a mile down the road, she allows her head to rest on the red back as she sees the road suddenly long before them. But seconds later, she says "Here" at a clump of mailboxes with a few straggly petunias growing around them. He scrapes his boot on the pavement and comes to a stop. She gets off, and he hands her the buckets, looks at her for a moment, and revs up again. She watches him disappear into a tiny, black speck at the end of the long, straight expanse of road, the sound no longer loud but soft and muffled, reverberating in her head as she crosses the bridge leading home, swinging her berry-laden buckets.

Requiem

Nancy Dillingham

The land is silent and still.
The pale, sandy earth begs rain.
Tobacco stands in long, even rows,
leaves wilted like silken, green handkerchiefs.

He walks with his familiar gait,
legs slightly straddled,
hands crossed hard behind him,
staring intently at the ground.

He no longer wears his strange apparel,
his funeral garments.

His gray work shirt is darkened
by wings of sweat.
The legs of his blue, gallused overalls
rub against each other.

An errand, he says.

We walk around the road
bruised with beauty.

On the porch, her summer cactus still blooms
her favorite color.
She always wanted to be buried in red.

She lingers in the room
in her Spring Flowers perfume.

He fumbles among the stack of bills
stuck between the radio and the Bible.

Answers to the federal government he dictates
as I write:
His wife has died . . .

I close the door behind me.

The oncoming roar of the usual afternoon shower
breaks the string in my mind;

the calm is shot by the sweetest sound
as the first drops begin to pound
the parched ground.

Reunions

Nancy Dillingham

After food on the porch
lined with flower buckets
and straw-bottomed chairs
that moved with the sun,
children climbed on the island of
rock to play and pose.

I remember Grandma,
her eyes still keenly blue,
wondering about saving seed from the hollyhock.

I hear her remembering:
Grandpa cutting logs from around the rock
to build the house;

her children running naked
in the cane patch below the rock
once when they had the itch;

the burning of tobacco beds all night,
and young boys getting drunk for the first time
then getting sick and lying against the big, cool rock
until sunrise;

children playing church on the big rock,
singing old revival songs in high, quavery voices
in the twilight.

Grandma died last year,
and one Saturday afternoon when the sun had dropped
and moved invisible chairs to the last triangle of shade
on the front porch,

strangers set sticks of dynamite under the rock,
and, in the falling light, the big rock groaned
and then crumpled like a giant clod of dirt.

The sun's red glow died on the horizon
like the last coals of a burnt-out tobacco bed.

Heart of the Matter

Nancy Dillingham

Across the road from the house he built with his own hands and which, as the story goes, had five bullets embedded in its bedroom ceiling, was the pond, man-made and stocked with fish but, more often, used as a swimming hole--especially after he had gone to prison and it became a public domain.

In the summers, the young boys swam in its murky core, looking with blinded eyes for the gun that he had supposedly thrown there, fantasizing the water clear and bright as glass reflecting the gun--big, bold, and blue-black--lying on its back on the silty floor. They imagined themselves bringing it to the surface, holding it high above their heads in their wet, young arms, waving it like a flag, shouting, Look, I've found it! I've found it!

But just as often, as they dove under the water, their arrow-slim bodies splitting the surface like shattering glass, they imagined her, his wife, there, rising from Poseidon's wide eye, red hair flowing, calling to them like a Siren in a softly hypnotic voice, her eyes glittering across the watery expanse,

In their nether world between heaven and hell, they floated out of time and into her arms. She held them more tenderly than did all the young girls who walked in the sunlit summer days above the earth's surface. They drowned in her.

When he suddenly returned a few years later, the young bodies rose out of the water like sleek seals, throwing off her charms like the droplets of water they shook from themselves.

One year late in summer, enticed by the few dollars offered, some of them were gathered at a neighbor's field to put up tobacco when he walked up, offering to help. Lined up like brown soldiers, the boys jerked the loaded sticks from the ground and handed them up to him as he stood straddle-legged, balancing all the while, on the trailer behind the slow-moving tractor. With great strength, he swung the sticks up and slapped them against each other, standing them up in the back of the trailer.

At the barn, he got off, climbed up and stood astride two tiers while the boys took turns mounting the trailer and handing the sticks up to him to hang, the others watching with crossed arms from the door of the barn.

The first thing they heard was a sharp, cracking sound as one of the tiers he was standing on began to give way. Then they saw him begin to balance himself. They noticed the small cracks in his black, scuffed-up boots, made from their getting wet and drying out too many times, as he shifted them in an attempt to take some weight off the breaking tier.

His arms flailing now, off-balance, he used the heavy, loaded stick that he had been in the act of hanging in a now-futile attempt to regain his balance, holding it, acrobat-like, above his head. The man driving the tractor looked dazed, almost asleep. The boy standing on the trailer still held the next stick, poised in the act of handing it up, his eyes widening, a look of astonishment spreading like water over his face. The others stood in the barn door, feet apart, arms folded, a row of brown statues, rooted to the ground.

The next thing they heard was a crash and a sharp cry, then a long, sustained moan, then silence as the dust settled. The broken tier hung down now in two splintered pieces, and they saw him there between them, impaled on the tobacco stick that he had been about to hang, the leaves askew, partially obscuring him. The stalks of cut tobacco had slid to the end of the wooden stick that was embedded in his chest, giving it force, weighing it down. A blob of purplish blood was seeping down the front of his overalls, some of it staining the brightly golden, curing-out leaves. His head slumped over his chest, he hung there stiffly on the stick, his upper body like that of the scarecrow in the cornfield above them, his legs rubbery, turned at grotesque angles, the shoes looking too heavy now.

In that first moment of immense silence that followed, the man on the tractor began to move, heavy and uncoordinated at first. Then he was there, the horror reflected in his face. The row of young boys stood there still, apart yet irrevocably joined, feeling the dying man's pain burning in their hearts, nailing them forever to the spot.

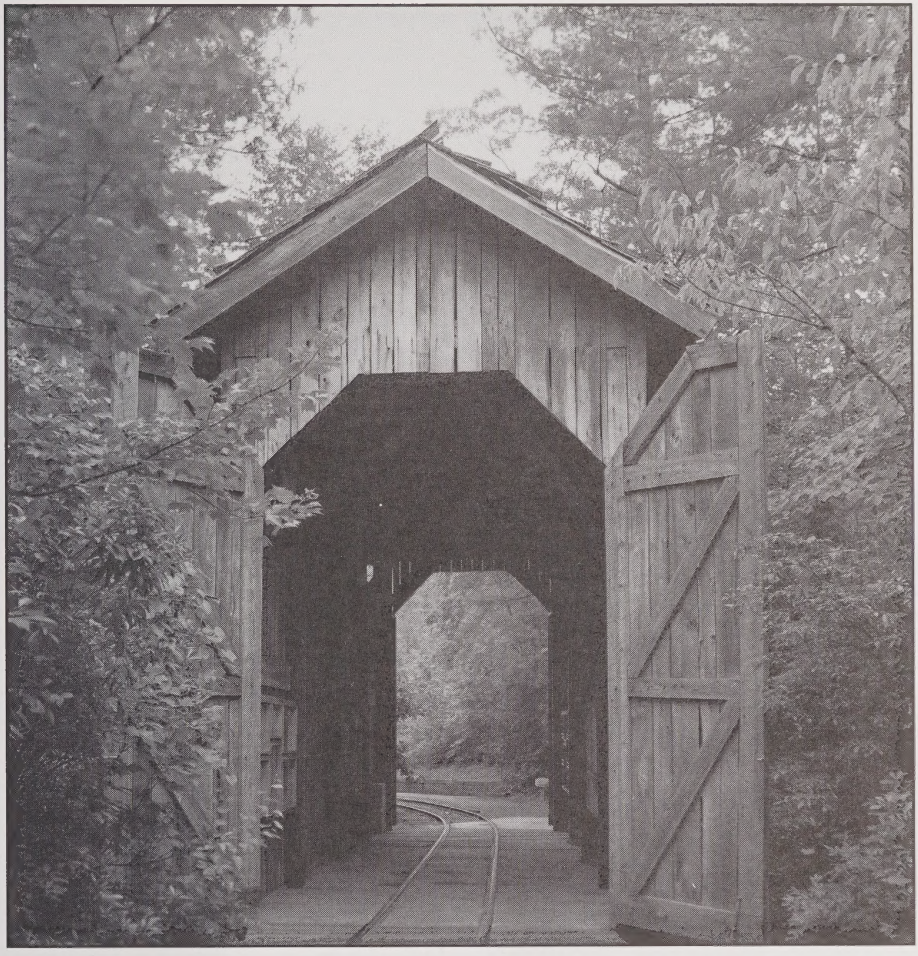


Photo by Lee Schleining

A Bent Page

Larry LeMasters

My head drops from my hand. Jerking awake,
I look about my cluttered cottage.
My neck turns slowly; it is stiff and aches.
On the floor Eliot lies open. A bent page
May have startled me with its versed rage.

Shadows cast dark images upon
Rough-hewn sooted stone as dying embers
Glow where blazing light once lived. Not long
I sat in stupored thought when a stir
Caught my eye near the pile of ash and fir.

A field mouse stood on feet and hairless tail
With pointed snout quivering. Perked ears,
Gray hair, elongated body--so frail.
All alone, he sought shelter and heat, here
Among shadows, mortality, and fear.

I sat and shared my death with the mouse.
A week later, my daughter sold the house.

I Remember

Larry LeMasters

There and there and here is where we lived.
There is where I got the first bed of my own.
That was our neighborhood store.
I remember walking a mile, barefoot and uphill,
In six inches of snow to buy Mail Pouch for Dad.

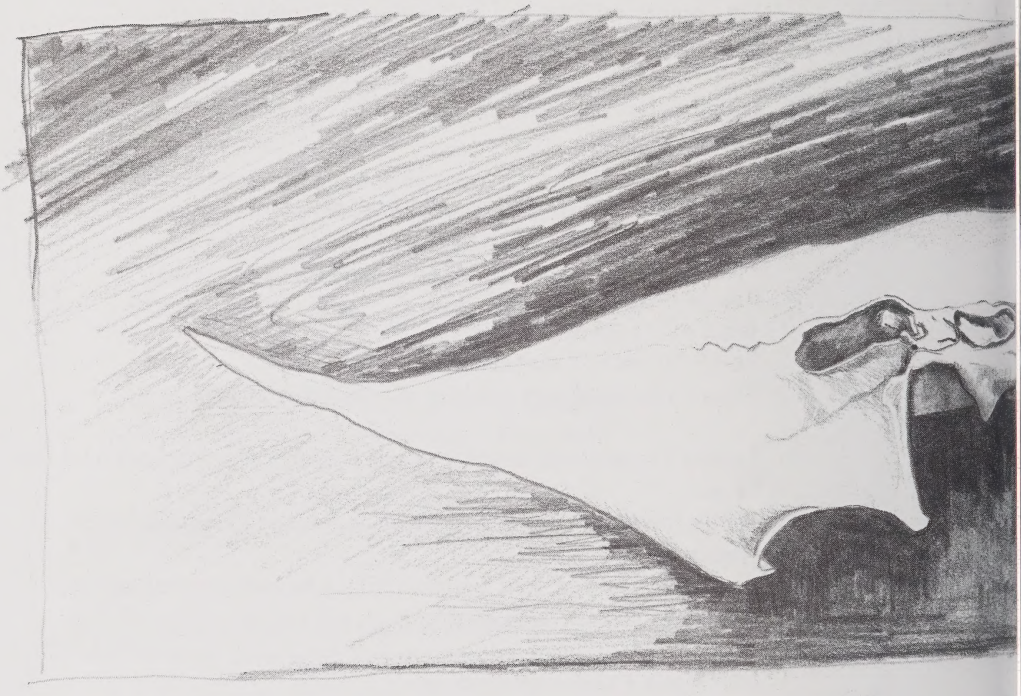
Uphill in both directions?
Certainly!

Your grandma and me went to school there;
It's where we first met.
The teacher asked us silly things:
Fourteen squared equals?
What's the capital of Iowa?
Who's buried in Grant's tomb?
What's your strongest memory of your grandfather?

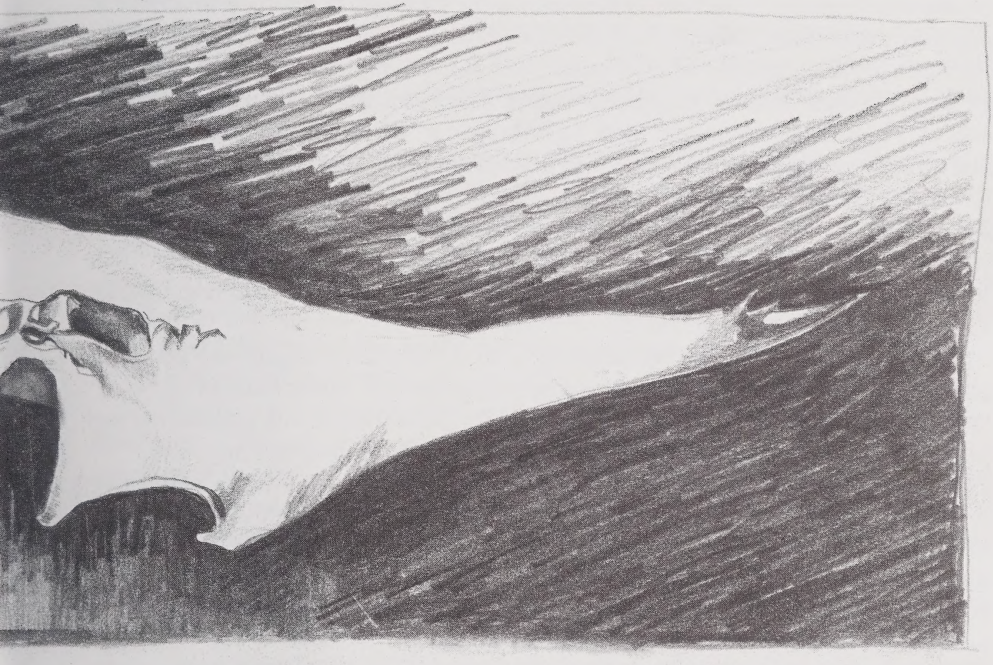
Cecilia Thomas told how she used to ride her grandfather's back like a horse.
Willie Joe caught bull-heads in the Suwannee River with his grandpapa.
Sarah brought a squirrel whittled from a hickory log, telling how
Her grandpa saw life in all things.

Me? Yeah, I have memories too.
Granddad always kept a cold strawberry soda close by.
He let me win at checkers.
And I remember his left shoe fell off the night they lynched him
For drinking from a whites only fountain on Main Street.

I remember.



Drawing by



ıer Gordon

Power and Responsibility in English 101

Kathy White

In 1981, I was the age of most of my current students, but, instead of struggling with English 101, I was struggling with an industrial sewing machine on an assembly line. In 1988, the factory closed its doors, and I returned to school at the local community college. I am convinced that the seven years in between are the basis of the criteria by which I judge what is most important to teach my own English students. When I returned to school nine years after graduation from high school, I took English 101 and Math 151. I made a "B" in English, but that English class had a profound impact on my life beyond sharpening my writing skills. Over three quarters, the instructor created a community in which I learned that what I have to say can have impact on the thoughts and actions of others and that I can minimize and maximize that effect by honing the necessary skills. Equally important, I learned through interaction with my classmates that I am responsible for the effect I choose to create.

On the assembly line, my value lay in the ability to relinquish any personal power and to effectively become a part of the machinery. After years in an environment where my voice was noticed only if it interfered with production and profit, the discovery I made in 101 was liberating, exhilarating and inspiring. Creating a classroom in which my own students can begin that process of discovery has become my primary goal as a writing teacher. Deciding how best to encourage them to discover the power of language and the power of their own voices is an ongoing process of trial and error. I must be willing to admit when an idea, however brilliant it appears, is not creating the opportunity for students to move ever so slightly toward that goal of discovery.

My primary responsibility--and the basic tenet on which I build my classroom strategy--is to encourage students to take risks. I firmly believe that a student who plays by all the grammar and classroom-etiquette rules and dutifully turns in mechanically correct formal papers but never takes a chance with form or content will leave my class an adequate writer. However, I regret if she leaves without coming near any new sense of power and responsibility. If, on the other hand, I can get that student to grab onto that more radical idea dancing around in her head, to dare try to write it down, to share it--any success she has belongs to

her. The resulting confidence is the beginning of realizing that writing can be more than a tool used to write college papers, that writing can be key to gaining more control over her own education and, consequently, her future.

The question then becomes practical. How do I convince students to take risks in my classroom? I attempt to create a "safe" place for class discussion. From the first day of class, I encourage students to view me as another learner, not as some supreme authority. I include a statement to that effect on my syllabus. I do not pretend that I don't have to function as their teacher in practical ways; they know that I have classroom policies to guarantee consistency in experience, and that I must evaluate their work, but I emphasize that I, too, am a student (and hope always to be). I am simply at a different stage of an educational process, a stage that they may choose to pursue or not. I don't have definitive answers to questions that arise in discussion which leaves them to find the value in their own evaluation of issues.

Viewing me as a learner promotes risk taking in other ways as well. Fostering of community frees the students to claim and voice their ideas without fear of chastisement by the "one" at the top with the "right" answer. Collaborative workshop sessions let students hear their peers and realize that no one's voice is privileged but that all have equal opportunity to be heard (or read) and considered. Eventually, this realization leads to increased confidence and increased awareness of the effect their voice has on the community of learners, encouraging them to accept responsibility for their own words.

Another critical component of creating a classroom conducive to the discovery of individual power and responsibility is designing a course program which provides the student with the freedom to decide where the urgency lies for them and to create a response that imparts personal meaning. Allowing this freedom involves some risk taking on the part of the instructor, as she/he has less control over the learning situation. The course becomes less predictable and planning must leave room for the students' influence. But, by giving up power in the situation, I leave them with the responsibility to address their own urgency, encouraging them to desire the means of effectively communicating that urgency. This is not to say that I allow my students to write about anything that comes to mind at any point in the class. I emphasize the students' responsibility to become aware of the ongoing, larger conversation regarding a particular set of issues before they actually join the discourse. We read and discuss several essays from various perspectives without privileging any political position, before any formal writing begins. Some articles are assigned, and students collect others which interest them. Often, they respond to new ideas in journal entries before class discussion to preserve individual first thoughts on the subject. Then, students can identify a

question that is an issue for them, not necessarily for the class, and write their ideas into the larger discourse community.

Of course some students may always politely or impolitely abstain from the community and attempt to avoid the resulting responsibility. Admittedly, the success of my strategy depends largely on the student's willingness to work toward a goal. But even the uncooperative students must be affected by the freedom in my classroom to exercise their voices and the responsibility that necessarily comes with that freedom if in no other way than to learn that their end product directly reflects the degree of energy they choose to invest. Without authority to blame or credit, they are responsible for whatever they take or don't take from the class. Ultimately, students can hardly remain in the class and not accept responsibility for the outcome.

Some students may come into the class with a well-developed sense of personal power and responsibility as relatively few will come from a factory. What then does my agenda offer that student? Just as the value of writing cannot be exhausted by practice, similarly I cannot believe any student reaches a level on which further refinement of an ability to control the power of language and respond to resulting responsibility is no longer valuable. More likely, there will be students who believe they have a voice worth hearing but have spent little time hearing the voices of others in the community, a scenario which is addressed by insuring that they are exposed to and asked to respond to various voices. Perhaps the most difficult trial of my philosophy comes from students whose voices I find personally distasteful: racist, sexist, homophobic, misogynic, etc. Logically, those perspectives, however unpleasant, must be heard and evaluated by the community in order for students to have a complete knowledge of the ongoing conversation and thus be able to join in responsibly. Consequently, rarely will students expressing objectionable opinions escape the censure of their classmates or the responsibility of creating their response, and the entire community benefits from the process of hearing, evaluating and challenging even the most offensive voice.

My goal is to provide a class experience which allows students the freedom to discover power in language and voice as well as the resulting responsibility. I have yet to find a problem that cannot be resolved within my philosophical frame. While I am not naive enough to think that every student who leaves my class will feel powerful and responsible in new ways, I know from my own experience that my attempt to allow students that discovery is a seed planted. Cultivation is their choice and responsibility.

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

John Bird Series
Number 6
The Victory Garden

M.J. Ferrell

Clarabel stared at the magazine she was holding. There was a full page on making a garden. The Sears and Roebuck catalogue had WAC uniforms for girls, too. Maybe Polly would order her one of those, and she would wear it while she worked in her victory garden. Clarabel took a long time to look at the magazine and the catalogue. She had a magic feeling and thought how it would feel to wear a uniform and to march in it, to be a WAC girl.

"Mommy," Clarabel said, "Do you have any garden seed left?"

"We do have some corn seed and some cornfield bean seed," said Polly. "And you can go out to the hogpen and get all them volunteer tommy toe tomato plants and set them out. Some of them may even be big tomatoes."

Clarabel gathered up the seeds and put them in her britches pockets. She walked to the very bottom half of the plowed, planted garden. There was a small end spot jutting down near the trail which had not been planted, where the horse had turned around with the plough and the "harr" when the garden was being worked. This was where she decided to make her garden. Clarabel started to lay off her rows just like she had seen Polly and John Bird do. She tried to keep them straight. She had to dig with the hoe and, at the same time, think about the straight way they had to be. She got six rows dug all the way through the patch in spite of worrying with getting them straight. Polly come by to look. "Well, the rows are some crooked, but they will still grow, maybe hold more seed."

Clarabel took out the corn seed, holding a hand full, and dropped the seed into the rows about a foot apart. Then she came back over the same rows and dropped in two bean seeds to each hill of corn. That was so each hill of cornfield beans could run up a cornstalk.

"You might want to fertilize it some," said Polly, "The ground is pore down here. Take a bucket and shovel and go up to the chicken house and get some chicken manure and put in the rows."

Clarabel was beginning to sweat, but she decided that a WAC would march out to the chicken house and haul out the manure. The manure was a bit smelly, but dry, so it was easy to shovel. Clarabel took the manure back and scattered a

little all along inside the open corn and bean row. Then, with a hoe, she covered up the seed.

About that time, Thomas came up the trail from the mailbox and walked right through the garden. He thought this garden was really funny and didn't matter at all. She wondered how she would keep Thomas from walking through the garden. Then it came to her what to do--she'd put up a no trespassing sign. That's what Weve Swangim had up on his place across the creek, and nobody messed in his place. Anyway, she was hungry, and it was close to supper time. She would finish up the garden tomorrow.

Polly hollered to Clarabel from the front porch, "Come to supper, bread and butter." Clarabel went in the back door and sat down at the table. Polly had prepared a cold supper to keep from firing up the wood cookstove. She had cornbread, beans, and potatoes left over from dinner. John Bird had put out pickle beets, butter and honey on the table, too. Thomas had been sent to the spring for milk, and Polly had already skimmed the milk, pouring everybody a glass full. She had peeled and sliced two onions, too. So everybody could have a quarter. Clarabel took a quarter of the onion, and pinched some salt out of the salt dish to put by her plate on the oilcloth to dip the onion in. It tasted good to take a bite of onion and then take a bite of cornbread. A swig of milk washed the big bite down.

Polly washed the dishes in the dishpan on the cooktable, poured water over them to rinse them and then dried them and put them up in the cupboard. John Bird and Thomas were already in the front room, listening to the radio. They were silent while they listened to the war news. John Bird said, "I'm turning the radio off, not going to burn up the batteries. Let's set on the front porch. I see Margaret and John coming down the field, and we can set and talk awhile."

CIarabel sat as long as she could listening to the old tales being told on the porch. She got ready to go inside.

"You wash your feet before you get into that bed," Polly said. Clarabel went into the kitchen and got the washpan off the cook table, poured in some water out of the water bucket, sat down in a straight chair and soaped and washed her feet. She dried them on a feed sack towel which hung on the doorknob. Clarabel went into the back room and got in her bed. Before she went to sleep, she thought about her box of things she kept under her bed and pulled it out to look in it. It was full of Indian arrow heads she had picked up down in patch town close to the Caney Fork Creek. She looked at them, ran her fingers over them, thought about the long ago. Then she put the box back under her bed and went to sleep.

The next morning Clarabel ate her breakfast down and headed back to the garden. She dug holes for the volunteer tomato plants, put the chicken manure in

the holes, and then strolled up behind the house to the barn and the hogpen where the plants were growing. Clarabel pulled up a handful of the plants, smelling their tomato smell. She looked at the tomato leaves, seeing the little bitty hairs, the pretty way they looked. She took the plants back to the garden and put one in each hole she had dug. She knew she would have to water them now, so she headed for the house to get the water bucket. She had to go to the spring to fill up the water bucket, setting it under the spring water spout to fill up. The water spout was made from two narrow boards nailed together to form a V. John Bird had made the spring spout by building a little dam at the edge of the spring and putting the board spout near the top to make the water run out.

Clarabel carried the bucket with the dipper in it carefully down to the garden patch. She went to each tomato hole and put in two dipperfuls of water. Then she hoed the dirt up around the plants, holding onto each one as she hoed. She straightened up the plants with her hands, then stomped the dirt firm around them.

Polly come down to look at the garden. "Go and break some limbs to shade the tomato plants," she said. Clarabel ran off to the hill above the house to break some limbs, thinking that this was getting hard. She came back with the broken limbs with green leaves on them and stuck them into the ground to shade the new tomato plants.

What I need now is to get my sign up, thought Clarabel, so she went in the house to the front room and tore out a page from John Bird's tablet. She also slipped in to get John Bird's indelible pencil. He didn't allow Clarabel to play with his indelible pencil, but she wanted the writing on this sign to be permanent. Clarabel studied and studied on how to spell trespassing, but she couldn't spell it. If she was at the John's Creek Schoolhouse, she would go to the dictionary stand and look it up, but she didn't have a dictionary at home. So she concluded she would have to make up a sign that she could spell. She lettered the sign, found a stick to nail it on, got a hammer and a nail and nailed up the tablet page. She got the go-devil, went to the garden and drove the stick into the ground. Clarabel looked back at her Victory garden and had a good feeling.

NO STOPPING OR PASSING, said the sign.

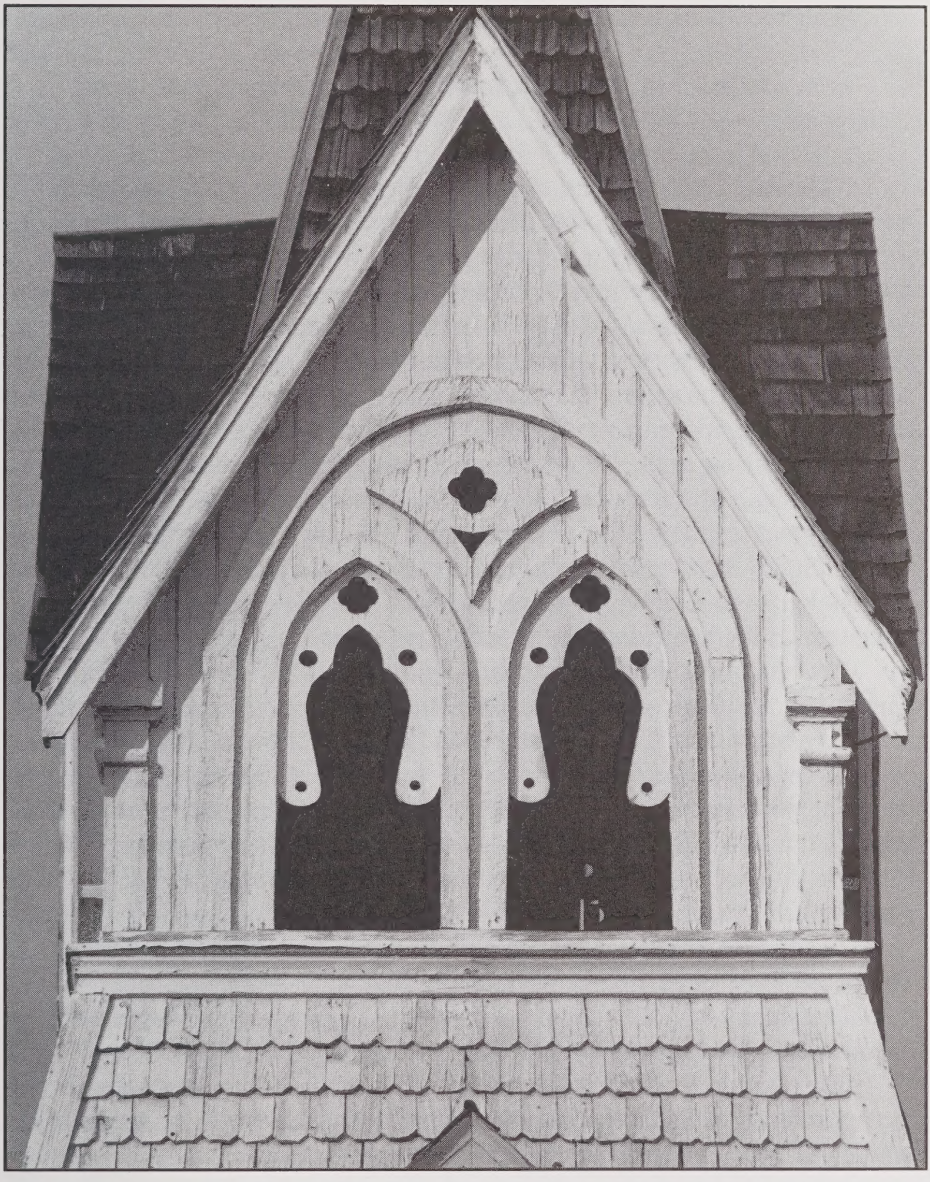


Photo by Lee Schleining

Mr. North Wind

Teresa Kennedy

"Oh, Mr. Glabb, you are so wrong! This New Englander can handle any winter these North Carolina mountains dare to dish out to me." Those were my thoughts as I met my closest neighbor who lived about three miles down the back of Ole Bearwallar Mountain. He surely doesn't know me or how used to winter I am. After all, I had made it through those two weeks in January, when in Vermont the thermometer had read about 35 degrees below zero each day. Those were the weeks when it was necessary to adopt the special routines every Vermonter begins to accept as normal January precautions. Take in the battery from the car each night and store it in the house, adding a prayer that it will start the car in the morning. When you go outside, breathe through a scarf or else your lungs will feel like they're full of icicles. Surely anyone who can adapt to that way of life can handle Ole Bearwallar. As I was thinking how wrong he was, Mr. Glabb added, "This mountain will either make ya or break ya--you'll see."

So, August came and went, and I enjoyed the view from the swing hanging on the porch on the front of the house. What a gorgeous, peaceful valley lay below me! Then September and all the glorious North Carolina colors came out to dazzle me. Not a bad display, this Vermont-foliage native had to admit. September also brought the flurry of autumn activities. We began to harvest from our huge garden. I carefully canned and preserved and stored in the root cellar all the food anyone could need in any winter conditions. "Oh, Mr. Glabb, you're so wrong!"

October followed September, and we began to pile up the fire wood. The house was heated only by wood stoves, but we Vermonters were used to that. One cord, two cords, three cords, surely that's enough. Well, maybe one more for good measure. "Oh, Mr. Glabb, you are wrong!"

Then came November and a wonderful respite from all the frenzied storing and piling and preparing of September and October. Once again, I sat on the porch swing and looked down in the valley. More of it was visible now with the leaves down on the ground. Also the valley lights at dusk were

a welcome hello from my neighbors below. They really aren't so far away. "Oh, Mr. Glabb, you are so wrong!"

December brought the holiday season and all the preparations for a family Christmas, including the anticipation of a visit from the step-daughter and new son-in-law who had never before seen our mountain retreat. Everything had to be perfect! I can handle this life, and I can handle whatever this mountain has in store for me. It's so easy. "Oh, Mr. Glabb, you are indeed wrong!"

Christmas eve day dawned cold and crisp, and I began to see that maybe North Carolina could rival a Vermont winter, or at least maybe on this mountain it could. No problem, though; it couldn't be any worse than Vermont. "Oh, Mr. Glabb, you are so wrong!"

The holiday activities continued in the old farmhouse much as planned, and the family moved closer to the wood stoves to share the memories and the stories that hadn't been shared since the last Christmas. Suddenly the stories were interrupted by a loud and unwelcomed north wind, a north wind that now in my acquired wisdom is a real entity to be respected. That wind came hollering down the side of the mountain and then back up again. It seemed as if a steam engine complete with whistle had been set loose on Ole Bearwallar. I had to admit I'd never heard a wind like that in Vermont. "Maybe, Mr. Glabb, this mountain is a little tough in the winter, but I'll handle it. You'll see."

That wind shook the house, sucked all the heat that the wood stoves could produce right up the chimneys and even rocked the water back and forth in the commode. I wouldn't have believed it! We stoked the fires--log after log--and the piles of wood were getting smaller with each hour that Mr. North Wind stayed on the mountain. "I think, Mr. Glabb, that I can handle this situation just fine."

With each passing hour the dependable stoves gave us their best, but the temperatures in the house continued to plunge. Soon we closed the door to the upstairs and brought all the house plants from those bedrooms to the first floor. Along with the plants came the mattresses and electric blankets. It was evident that Christmas eve night would be spent camping in the living room next to the Christmas tree. What family fun! "I can handle this, Mr. Glabb!"

Throughout the night, as the children slept soundly, my husband and I got up on the first ring of the alarm clock set for each hour on the hour. We quickly filled the faithful stoves with as many logs as they would hold and then went back to bed next to the Christmas tree to catch what sleep we could. "This is getting tough, Mr. Glabb, but I **can** handle it!"

When the alarm rang at five in the morning, I realized that we had made it through the night. However, I also realized that Mr. North Wind had made it through the night, too, and was still storming and thundering up and down the mountain, stealing all the heat from our farmhouse. I looked at the inside thermometer. Even with all our loading of logs all night long, the kitchen thermometer registered only forty degrees. "Well, Mr. Glabb, do we stay and take our chances of freezing on this old mountain or do we leave?" "Oh, Mr. Glabb, I thought I could make it! But you see, I had never before met Mr. North Wind on Bearwallar. My New England bones had never experienced quite as powerful a fellow as he.

So, disappointed that maybe Ole Bearwallar would break me, I went to the car. We decided that we had better head to the valley, just to be safe. We got in the car, turned the key and ..... nothing! The north wind had stolen our only escape from this cold mountainside. "Surely, Mr. Glabb, I can't let this mountain break me!"

Returning to the house with new determination, I thought and thought. I had to find a way to beat the north wind. I wouldn't let him break me. Finally it dawned on me. It really wasn't such a novel idea. Many others had tried it successfully before me. I believed it could work, so why hadn't I tried it before now. I prayed. After all, what else was there for me to do? There was no other way to fight Mr. North Wind and Ole Bearwallar Mountain. So I did pray, and I did feel better. There, I've done all I can and, "Surely, Mr. Glabb, I can survive with the help of someone stronger than I!"

Well, it was Christmas morning, a time of wonderful happenings, and, for me, the most wonderful one of all occurred that cold December holiday. Mr. North Wind departed about six a.m. and stayed away for several weeks. I didn't let Ole Bearwallar break me. Maybe in a way it had made me! "And, yes, Mr. Glabb, you were right. This Vermonter had a great deal to learn from a north wind in an old North Carolina mountain farmhouse."

Vernal Varmint

G. David Waechter

Oh! Vernal Varmint, fortune teller of spring
Perceiver of the shadows;
forerunner of leaves so green
Vernal Varmint, to you I sing!

Come now, have no feat of the faithful.
Bless us now with your famous talent;
open thine eyes and look beyond thy burrow.
Will blossoms bloom in six weeks or tomorrow?

Oh! Vernal Varmint, leap and prance
Scramble, scramble to the cause;
lead us, be our vanguard with thine furry paws.
We exalt thee in thy glory, so dance, dance!

Vernal Varmint, my love of loves;
bring me peace with onset of spring.

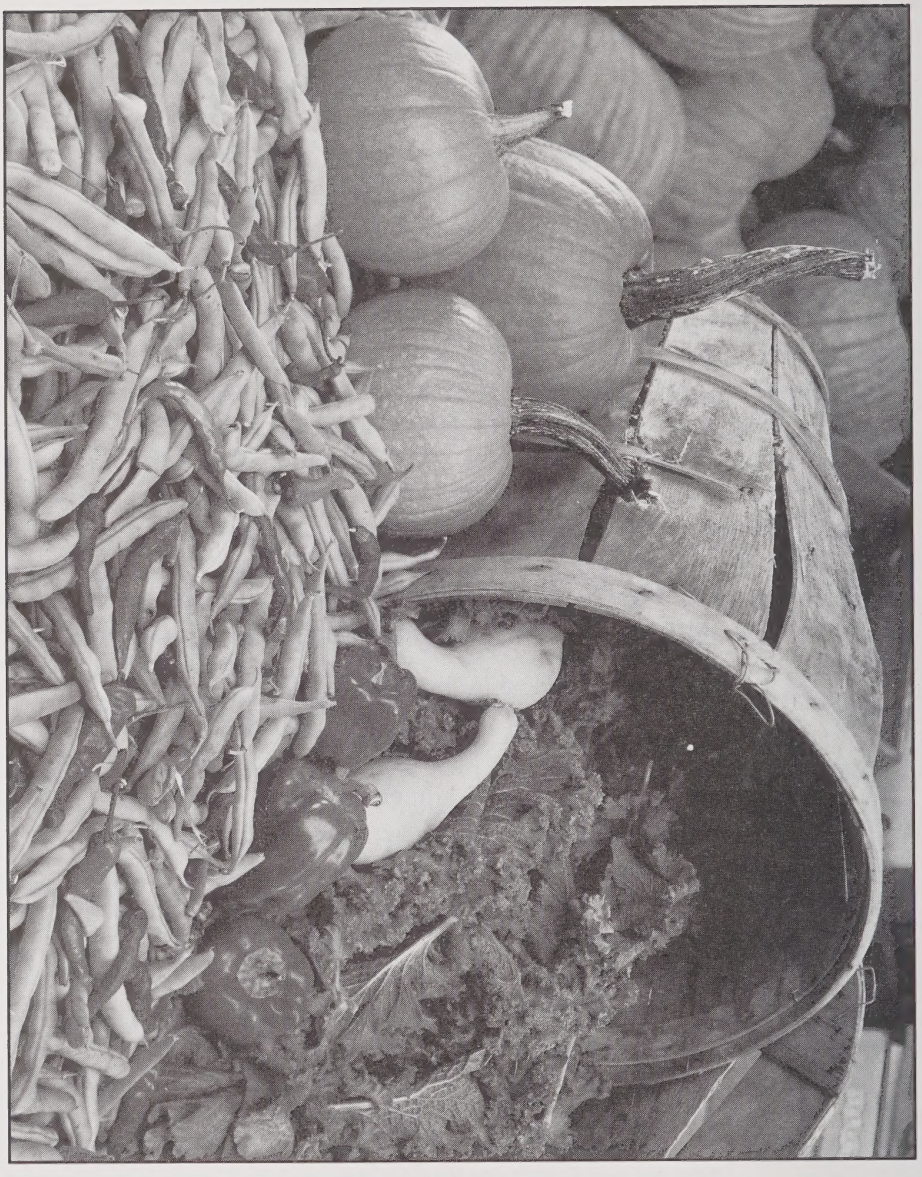


Photo by Tim Barnwell

Untitled

Jeni Parris

Today I thought of you;
dim laughter,
bright smiles,
falling tears.

Today I thought of you;
red flowers,
twinkling stars,
black rain.

Today I thought of you;
wet kisses,
sparkling gold,
bitter separation.

Today I thought of you;
bare caresses,
brilliant sunlight,
resounding silence.

Today I thought of you;
rough wool,
falling snow,
quiet melancholy.

Today I thought of you;
spraying water,
lofty peaks,
stark realization.

Today I thought of you.

Stephanie

Will Hooper

I see a picture--
Loosely tasseled auburn hair
lying on your
long lovely neck
Mischievous sexy smile.
Surely you didn't die?

I see a memory--
the seventh grade--
teacher's pet;
control the class
while he's out--
ring the bell and
settle the class down,
we made a deal--
"let me go outside
let me tell you a secret--"

When we grow up
we sometimes look for love
in strange ways.
Surely you didn't trade your love
for a drink and a steering wheel.

I see a picture--
grit my teeth.

The Tree of Knowledge

Will Hooper

That tree, I tell you--shot to skyblue
in the spring from a shock of grass
and covered with green

And one day I learned there
that sunlight shares its secrets
with leaves and lazy lads

And the tree took its share
and turned the light into pears
while my share became dreams

We laid a path that was straight and green
to that cool shade from the summer heat
that felt like icy water from a stream

And one day I learned as I heard
the wind speaking without words
a vision known only to me

And we turned those pears into Koolaid pops
frozen in Grandma's icebox
purple tongues and sticky hands

In autumn, when the leaves were filled
with secrets they would fall--
A tawny patchwork quilt lay on the ground

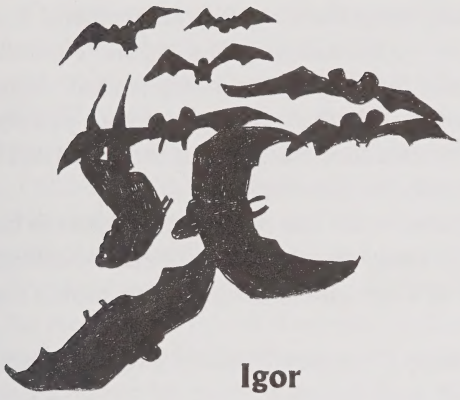
And one day I learned there
that a skeleton can grace the silent land
in November's amber light

Never was death as lovely
as that colored circle beneath the tree
faded from red and gold to brown

One winter I learned something
when the tree was cut down--
A white December snow lay on the ground

The sun's secrets shattered
all around like broken glass
unable to sketch that noble frame

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin



Igor

Julia Nunnally Duncan

I'm still a stranger in my town, not quite settled into a teaching job at the county high school, not yet accustomed to the ways of the local people. But I've noticed that there are a few individuals here who might be called *characters.* A man who lives next door to me, Manley Hawkins, falls into this category. I've noticed him practicing his peculiar hobby, which he explained to me one Sunday night as we sat together at the edge of his front yard.

"Some people think I'm foolish for being so partial to bats," he said. "But I don't know what I'd do if it wasn't for bats and the nights I spend watching them. You know, they're real entertaining, beat T.V. any time. But you can't tell that to some people. Take my wife, for instance. She'll always have some smart-aleck thing to say about me watching them. The other night she said, 'Manley, if you don't get in this house, I'm gonna call EMS to come pick you up. Get in here before somebody sees you. You ain't got no business sitting under that streetlight waiting for bats to fly. It don't make sense.' But Reba ain't sensitive at all. Couldn't expect her to understand. Other people are worse about it, though, like fellers at the plant.

"A few weeks ago I was sitting out here like tonight, and I heard a pick-up truck coming. I thought I recognized the sound of the motor, and I was right. Joe and Frank Johnson from my department. They drove on by

the house, and when they come back by, they stopped and blowed the horn. 'Wife kick you out?' Joe yelled and raced his engine. I told him I was watching for the bats, and that's when the joking started. Now everybody at work calls me *the bat man.* I don't guess that's so bad; you could be called worse. But I don't appreciate them laughing at me about it. They should have more respect; if not for me, for the bats.

"But I guess I'd have to say one reason I favor bats is because other people hate them. Why, I can't think of nobody else who feels like I do. I reckon it is unusual. But they make great pets; you couldn't ask for a cleaner animal."

I had to jump in here. "Manley," I said, "I've never heard of anybody keeping a bat as a pet--"

"Yeah," he said, "I caught me one one time. Kept it for a couple of weeks and then set it loose again. This is how it happened: I made me a bat-catcher by hooking a butterfly net to a long bamboo pole and sat here in my lawn chair and waited. When a bat flew out of them white pines over there, I lifted the pole and snatched it right out of the air as it swooped down on a giant Luna moth. I swung the pole down to the ground quick so the net covered the bat. I was shaking with excitement. With a glove on my hand, I put the bat in a little wire hamster cage and took it in the house. It looked pitiful in bright light. Such a furry little body and long, bony wings, not much meat to it at all. I'd heard they look like a mouse, but this one didn't. It reminded me right much of a tiny feisty dog I had once. Them oversized ears standing up, wild-like, and dark, shiny eyes, round as a penny.

"It got used to me after a few days. I fed it little bits of hamburger meat and moths. I'd never seen anything chew its food so fast or so careful-like before it swallowed. Seemed like it was always thirsty. When I put a medicine dropper full of water to the cage, it'd dart its tongue out and lap it fast. You should've seen it. I got real pleasure from watching that animal drink water. But I thought I'd better turn it loose. It started acting funny, wouldn't eat, just hung in its cage with its wings folded tight around its body, wouldn't even groom itself. That troubled me."

He studied his hands now, and didn't speak. I looked at him, trying to see his expression. It wasn't often he kept silent for this long. But the darkness and the streetlight with its pale illumination shadowed his face.

"I imagine it's happier free," he said after a while. "That might be it flying up there now. Igor--that's what I called it.

"You know, a lot of people are scared of bats. You notice I'm wearing a sweater with a hood? Well, I do so for a reason. I don't sit out here without my hood pulled up, no sir. Why, one night I almost had heart failure after a bat attacked me. I was walking into the back yard, heading for my workshop that's in a room at the rear of the house, and I heard a squeaking sound. I looked up and couldn't see for the dark. Then I felt something smack my head, and I run. It chased me, flapping at my hair, squealing like a demon. When I reached the room, I run in and slammed the door. I could hear it flying into the door, squealing louder than ever. I stood listening and shaking, too scared to leave the room. I stayed there till midnight, when I heard Reba pounding on the wall from inside the house. She come out to see why I'd stayed in my workshop so late and wouldn't believe my story.

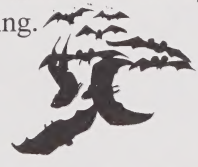
"That night she said, 'It's probably the one you trapped, trying to get even.' She never thought much of Igor. But this bat wasn't Igor. Igor liked me. I've not been attacked again, but I wear a hood just in case. Reba says bats are bad to carry rabies. But so are dogs.

"I like to think about bats while I'm working. I'll be rubbing stain on a piece of furniture, and all of a sudden, I'll see one zigzagging through the dusky sky, flitting around an old barn, or swooping at a moth in the moonlight. I wonder if the bats look down at me while I'm looking up at them. I wonder if Igor flies by."

"Hmm," I said to Manley, not knowing what to say, but I don't think he heard me.

"Don't know why," he said, "but it seems like I think about bats more all the time. I'll be honest with you: I don't know what I'd do without them."

That night after I left Manley's yard, I didn't know what to make of his tale. Maybe there was nothing to be made of it. In any case, he's out there tonight gazing at the streetlight, waiting.



Drawing by Richard Croom

Celtic Threads

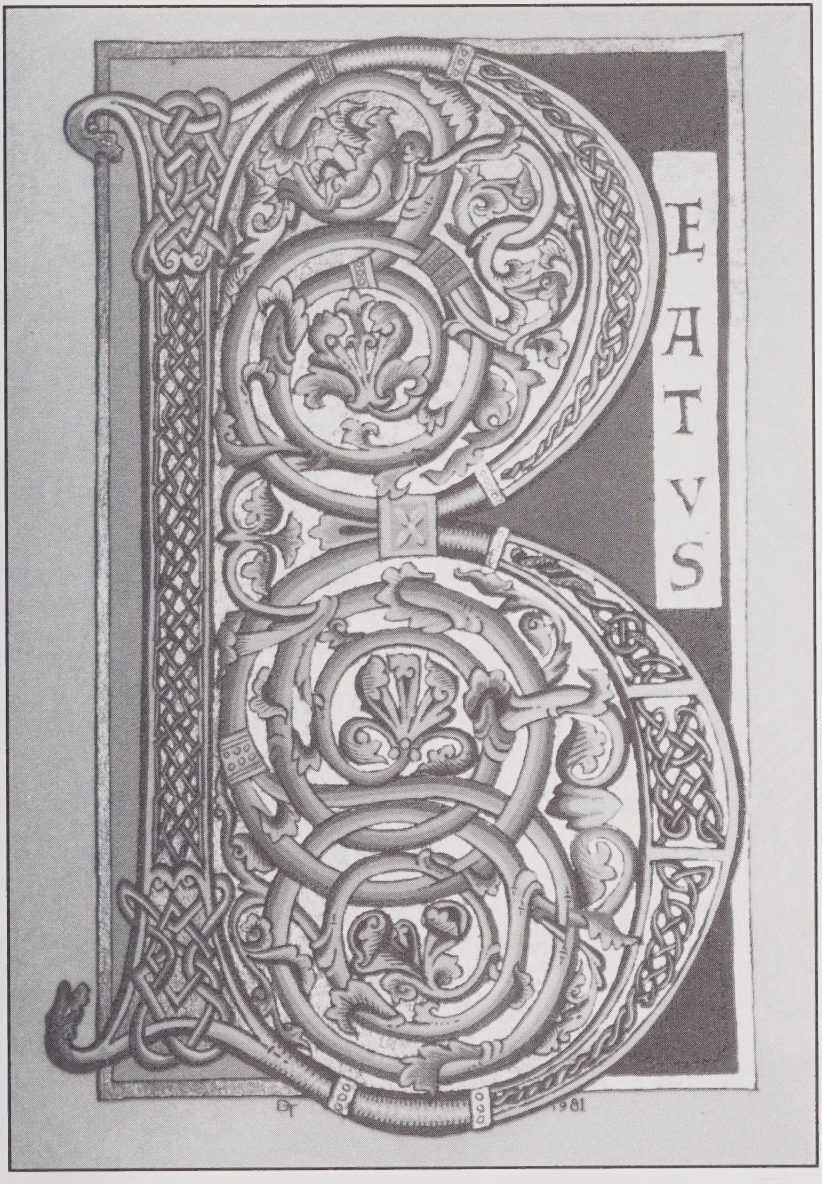
Bobbie Pell

Celtic threads
bind the body
to the land,
to the wind,
to the water
bringing life.

Celtic threads
bind the heart
to courage,
to faith,
to belief
in steadfast love.

Celtic threads
bind the soul
to mystery,
to passion,
to color-filled images
within us.

Feel the weaving.



Calligraphy by Derick Tickle

The Snow Reflects Light

Dean Presson

The snow reflects light
and even though the sun has gone down
and it's twilight,
The sky is more whitish clouds than darkness.
Thank goodness for snow!
In memory of lost snowy evenings,
It has brought a calm and
Stillness even while the wind blows cold.
I thought I forgot to feel this way,
Like a calm man of renewed faith in quiet nature.
There's no worry about rushing off to work tomorrow,
and the evening has just begun.

I still hope it stays awhile, the light snow
Becoming night, yet the calmness of sounds
Falling amid the cold evening and
No concern for tomorrow.

Woodcut by Shirley McLaughlin

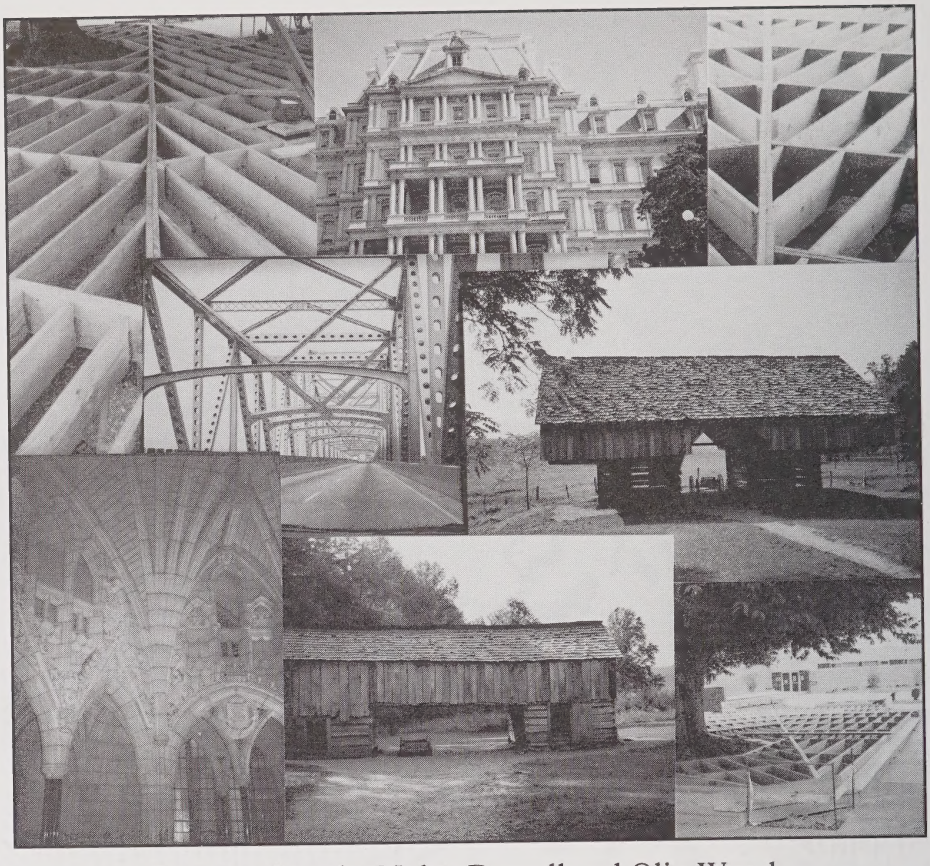


Photo collage by Nolan Darnell and Olin Wood

Saying Kaddish

Adrienne Hollifield

Our Western culture is preoccupied with time. We make appointments and are expected to keep them fairly exactly. Our concept of time is linear, consisting of a past, present, and future, with points marking specific events along the way. Therefore, it is somewhat disconcerting, in contemporary society, that the exact moment of birth and death cannot be calculated. It disrupts our schedules, our routines, and because families also tend to be spread out over larger distances, necessitating elaborate travel plans, we feel an even greater need to pin down an exact moment for these important events.

My mother took a very long time to die. For two years, I told each of my professors that my mother was terminally ill and I might have to leave school at any time. During the last year, we expected her to go several times, only to be fooled as she stared Death in the face one more time and said "Not yet." When you prepare for death enough times, you start to become unprepared--this must be the fire drill again. Since my mother lived in New York City and I live in North Carolina, I worried constantly that I would not recognize the signs of the end, so it became almost an obsession to try to decipher the implications each time another part of my mother's body started to decline.

On Wednesday, October 5, I called my mother's doctor to try to assess her condition and see if it was necessary for me to drop everything and leave for NY. He hesitated but said to wait; he would call me if things changed. Four days later, my mother called and said, "If you want to see me, come now." She had never asked me to come before, so I assumed that she knew more about when she was going to die than the doctor did. I booked a flight for the next day.

The limousine service took me from the airport straight to Montefiore Hospital. I had seen my mother just two months earlier, but I wasn't prepared for how she looked now. She was emaciated with enormous, hollowed out,

glassy eyes. Her hair had grown back after the radiation and chemotherapy, and it was soft and downy like a bird's. Actually, she looked a good bit like a fragile bird, and, as I hugged her gently, I remembered that I had often jokingly called her "a tough old bird."

The hospital is the common contemporary setting for death. Despite attempts in recent years to make it less imposing, it is still a largely impersonal environment. The dominant color in hospitals is white, perhaps as a talisman to chase off the evil specter of death. Tubes and machines add to the impersonality. My mother had an oxygen tube and a saline nebulizer mask for when she panicked at not being able to breathe. When she walked to the bathroom, we had to call for an oxygen tank and trail tubes and tank behind her. Later, when she could no longer walk, tubes were inserted to take care of her body's wastes.

My brother-in-law is a doctor at Montefiore Hospital, so I was allowed to be in my mother's room before visiting hours officially began at 12 noon. My shift was from 8 am to 6 pm. At 6:00, a health aide came to be with her for the night. Between 8 am and 12 pm, the various nurses and technicians that pricked and prodded my mother gave me quizzical looks, wondering what I was doing there. If anyone had challenged me, I would have told them I belonged there as much as they did, but no one openly questioned me.

On my first day at the hospital, I attempted to do some reading as I sat by my mother's bedside, but I soon realized this was impossible. She was too uncomfortable and kept me busy running to fetch things for her, helping her in and out of bed, and finding a nurse when needed. Mom had neither the energy nor the breath to speak much, so she began writing what she wanted to say in a spiral notebook. This book became a chronicle of her last days, and the words in it took on a poignancy that would have been lost if they had been spoken. Mom had spells during which she had great difficulty breathing. Her night aide helped her through these periods of panic by holding her hand and giving her something to hold on to. Here's how my mother explained it to me in her book:

> My little pillow--
> One night that I couldn't sleep--she gave me the pillow after I held her hand for a while--
> I clutched it and clutched my hands to help me relax.

In this terse prose, my mother communicated her fear, the compassion of the aide, and how attached she had become to a small, nondescript pillow.

Later that day, my brother-in-law and my mother's doctor came to talk to my mother about signing a DNR, a Do Not Resuscitate order. The DNR, the Health Care Proxy, and the Living Will are attempts to deal with the medical profession's ability to keep a body alive, often in pain, long after it is reasonable to do so. My brother-in-law attempted to outline for my mother, as clearly and compassionately as possible, what resuscitation means and when it is used to advantage. When the heart or breathing stops, resuscitation is used to restart those vital functions until the body resumes them on its own. For a healthy person, the mechanical ventilator takes over until the person can breathe on her own again. For an aged or diseased person, being put on a ventilator can cause much pain and various complications. It only prolongs the inevitable outcome, death. My mother was in the latter group, my brother-in-law said, and he advised her not to be resuscitated.

I never fully related to the Greek idea of the nobility of man in the face of his inevitable mortality until this particular moment. We all confronted our own death at that moment: my mother, my brother-in-law, and I. My brother-in-law sacrificed a great deal of himself to tell my mother that she was dying and to try to persuade her that she should not do everything possible to save her life. It is difficult enough for any doctor to say that to a patient, but much more so when that person is someone you love. That moment was as sweet and gentle and heroic as Hector's taking off his helmet and tenderly playing with his baby, in *The Iliad.*

Despite my brother-in-law's noble plea, my mother remained steadfast in her refusal to accept death easily. She wrote in her notebook, "Give me one more chance," meaning she did want to be resuscitated. Nothing my brother-in-law, her doctor, or I could say would change her mind; she was adamant. We all knew that my mother's decision was not in her best interests, but I feared we would be unable to do anything about it.

As Mom was drawn closer to death, little details, concrete details, became more important to her. She always wore her watch, which she looked at constantly, watching the hours, minutes, and seconds of her life tick away. Everything on her bedside table and in her area of the room had to be placed just so. Her life was out of her control, but the little things in it could still be manipulated. She kept me busy moving things around in different ways.

Nothing missed her notice. A song on the radio of the lady in the next bed caused her to write: "The name of that song is 'Going Home' by Dvorak." Details were all she had left to tie her to the world of the living--details and pain. She clung to both as she clung to life, with a fierce devotion. After the talk about the DNR, we were watching a news program on TV and my mother suddenly grabbed her notebook and wrote: "I will never find out what happened to OJ." I laughed and told her none of us would ever *really* know about OJ, but I understood that this represented all the living she was going to miss.

Sometime during the next day, my mother knew she was going to die soon. Earlier in the day she asked me not to go home that night, but, when it came time for me to leave, she changed her mind and let me go. Sure enough, Mom's blood pressure dropped during the night, and we rushed to the hospital to find her conscious but confused. Shortly after that, the doctors decided that she was in respiratory failure. Here was the moment I had dreaded. The resident on call was ready to put her on a ventilator. Another doctor intervened and asked us if we had discussed resuscitation. I desperately wanted her to die in peace, but what were we to do about her stated wishes to be resuscitated? Could we (or the doctors) in good conscience ignore them? Once again my brother-in-law came to the rescue. It seems that there are more aggressive methods of intervention and less aggressive ones. There is a manual means of putting air into the lungs which is considered resuscitation, but, if after a period of time the patient fails to breathe on her own, no further efforts are made to continue the procedure. This would be the "one more chance" my mother wanted. I cried with relief as my sister told the doctor what we wanted to do, and then cried because what I was relieved about was being able to allow my mother to die.

The doctors promised to keep my mother free of pain and as comfortable as possible until the end. She slipped into a coma shortly after the respiratory failure started, and all that was left to do was to wait. My sister and I sat by her bed and cried. Mom looked so peaceful though, sleeping and breathing slowly, that the tension caused by dealing with her fear and pain dissipated into a kind of relaxed calm. Over the next twelve hours, sitting around that bed, my sister and I reminisced and dealt with other relatives who came to visit. When my sister's family came that evening, including her two sons (aged 16 and 18), we brought up soup from the coffee shop and ate and laughed and joked and included my mother in the festivities one last time. In some ways, it seemed odd to be having a party there by the

bed of a dying woman; in other ways, it seemed the perfect response. Life was reasserting itself in the face of death.

My sister and I kept our vigil after everyone left. We were so tired we slept in our chairs with our heads on the bed. When Mom stopped breathing, the doctors and nurses rushed in to do the manual resuscitation process while my sister and I waited in another room. I prayed that it wouldn't work, that this ordeal would be over for her and us. My mother died on Friday, October 14, 1994, at 12:55 am, just a few hours after Allen Ginsberg read his poem "Kaddish" (which is the Jewish prayer for the dead) in UNCA's Lipinsky Auditorium.

My sister and I went back to the room to see Mom one more time. I was shocked at how she didn't look like the same person. I kept thinking there was a mistake; this was not my mother. I realized right then that the body is just a house for the soul--it is the soul that gives us life. My mother was really gone. While all this time I had been praying she'd die and be put out of her pain, all of a sudden I wanted her to breathe again. Even an unresponsive, sleeping mother was better than no mother at all. I wanted her back. I wanted her to demand something, to be annoying but TO BE ALIVE!

I have never before had someone that close to me die, nor have I ever actually seen anyone die. The images of this time swirl around in my head before I fall asleep, when I just wake up, when I daydream and when I'm supposed to be reading. I think of my brother-in-law crying as he talked to my mother, of my mother writing in her notebook, clutching her little pillow, looking fragile as she lay in a coma. I think of the doctors and nurses who are trained to do everything in their power to keep one alive, but who must restrain themselves to let you die. I think of my sister telling my mother good-bye when Mom decided she wouldn't make it through the night. I remember my 18-year-old nephew's grief, so overwhelming at his first big loss. I remember collapsing into tears as I looked at my son, Reuben, for I am his mother and looking at him made me acutely realize my loss.

While the process of dying may be different now than it was one hundred years ago, the grieving process must be the same. We all must go on with our busy lives, functioning in our everyday routines. I have slipped back into my life and truly have good and happy moments, but another part of me aches and knows that I will never be the same.

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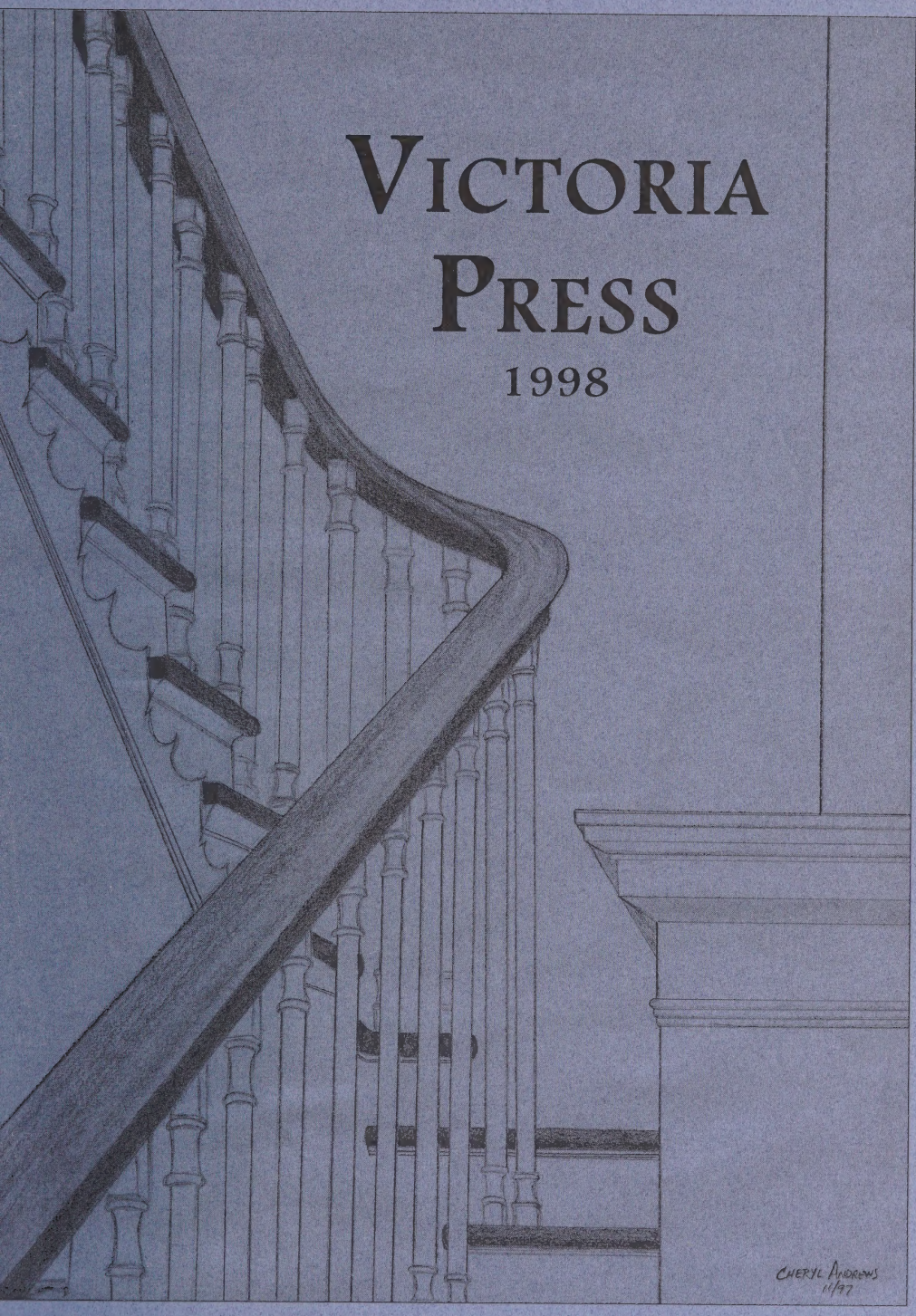
Woodcut by Shirley McLaughlin



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1998

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College

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FOURTH ISSUE

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Cover drawing by Cheryl Andrews of the stairway in the Magnolia Building.

Watercolor by Annie Cicale

The following selections are taken, with permission, from *Explorations*, a book of essays/explorations of Wilma Dykeman's multi-faceted life: from here to China, from past to present, from joy to grief.

In this essay written shortly after his death, Ms. Dykeman tells of meeting her husband, James Stokely, and pays tribute to him and their life together as "a couple...destined for each other." "The Mate" is by James Stokely.

Excerpted from *Explorations*

Wilma Dykeman

"Midway this way of life we're bound upon

I woke to find myself in a dark wood,

Where the right road was wholly lost and gone."

That dark wood of which Dante wrote awaits each of us. Sometimes it presents itself on a sunny summer afternoon. Before we even know the invitation has been issued the darkness gathers and we grope toward an ancient exploration.

Down, down into ourselves we go like a lost wanderer knowing no path through the woods, finding no light to illuminate the lonely way. We discover a self and a suffering whose existence is stranger than far countries or lost rivers.

No matter what age we may be by the calendar when the dark wood closes in, the moment comes at mid-life. Life on either side of the woods will never seem or be the same again.

Thus, within the space of an hour on a late June afternoon, I came into the dark woods.

I must tell of the beginning if the end is to have meaning.

On a Sunday morning in a long-ago-August Thomas Wolfe's sister brought a stranger to my house.

Thomas Wolfe was a big, exuberant writer who wanted to bring all of America into the grand design of his fiction. Mable Wolfe was a big, exuberant woman who wanted to bring all of her friends together in the generous embrace of her hospitality. And so, she came with the young stranger from Tennessee, unannounced, early one Sunday morning while I was in the flower garden cutting a fresh bouquet before the dew disappeared.

I had a brand new degree from Northwestern University and the contract for a career to begin in New York in September.

But as my visitor and I talked—that day, and that evening, and the next day, and the next—we discovered that we were both interested in words and in woods, in theater and in

thought, in being very social on some occasions and very much alone on other occasions. We were passionately fond of travel, and equally happy in staying at home. We liked the mountains and people up the little coves and hollows, and we also wanted to see deserts and cities and people who were in places of power and fame. Many of the things that made us perplexing to other people made us seem clear and right to each other.

From August to October was only a breath of time. Yet it was a lifetime. The contract and New York and September washed away in a misty haze. And on a brilliant blue autumn day, October 12, in the garden where I had been picking summer flowers, surrounded by banks of flaming leaves brought from the woods and baskets of great richly-colored dahlias and chrysanthemums, Mabel Wolfe's friend and I were married. And just to live up to the spirit of Thomas Wolfe, we took a wedding trip across America, from October 12 to December 20—seeking to know our native land.

We remained married—to each other—for thirty-seven years. I pity those who will never know such a long and good togetherness. It was not easily achieved. Courage, effort, generosity, humor, determination went into those years. The result was love.

Then, on an afternoon in June, sun-tanned and smiling, suddenly he sank onto the grass beside his garden and was dead.

The world was changed. For a few people on this mysterious planet nothing will be the same again. Yes, the oak outside the window will stand, the garden will bear, summer will flourish and wane, other lives will continue their familiar routine—but all diminished because he is not here. And I shall continue, too, diminished by his absence, but better than I could ever have been without his presence for a little while.

We met in a garden and we parted in a garden. I was picking flowers in my mother's garden in Asheville on that summer morning when we met. He wore a white shirt, open at the collar with rolled-up sleeves, against which his smooth skin was a golden tan and his eyes were the clear blue of sea or sky, and before that day was finished he had asked me if I liked books and the woods and the final question— Beethoven. Two weeks later I canceled my career in New York. In October we were married. I believe there never was a couple more destined for each other.

Very few people knew the true dimensions of James' life. In a world where outer appearances are judged as reality he invested more and more of his time in inner riches. In a time when bigger is considered best and power seems a prize worth any sacrifice, he cherished the fragile spirit, the delicate creativity that flows from an eternal power. In a period when the loud and the self-proclaiming receive the world's awards, he was quiet and self-forgetful.

He was also a person of immense power. With all his gentleness he was capable of deep anger. Anger against injustice—injustice in any form or dimension— led him into some lonely valleys. He never talked of those experiences because he had no martyr's complex—too much laughter to be a martyr. And when his family or friends or society caught up with his farsighted vision, he never suggested an attitude of "I-told-you-so." He was too busy looking ahead to other horizons. In all his patience he seethed with powerful impatience. Impatience with trivia—the second-rate in our cultural, spiritual, educational, political, industrial,

individual and social lives—led him to some lonely pinnacles. This grieved him because any riches of mind or spirit or body that he discovered he wanted to share with everyone else. And every day was an adventure of discovery for him.

I never met anyone who savored more deeply the potential of the moment. Whether we were in a strange land or here in our own familiar mountains, whether we were listening to the first katydids of summer or the Eroica Symphony, whether we were among exciting famous people or talking with old-timers or were alone together. To whatever we were doing he brought full appreciation, passion, imagination.

People sometimes asked if he was disconcerted by my writing, my career. How little they knew him! He had no identity crisis, no need to narrow anyone else's life to enhance his own. Indeed, one of the purposes of his life seemed to be to make sure that everyone—no matter race or sex, social status or creed—should have not only opportunity but encouragement to be not only good but best.

And he was the best. Funny and sad, uniquely innocent and infinitely sophisticated, he balanced the world of nature and the world of books and dwelt in a realm of special goodness. He would not have liked that word, it would embarrass him. But he was good. We shall rarely see his like again.

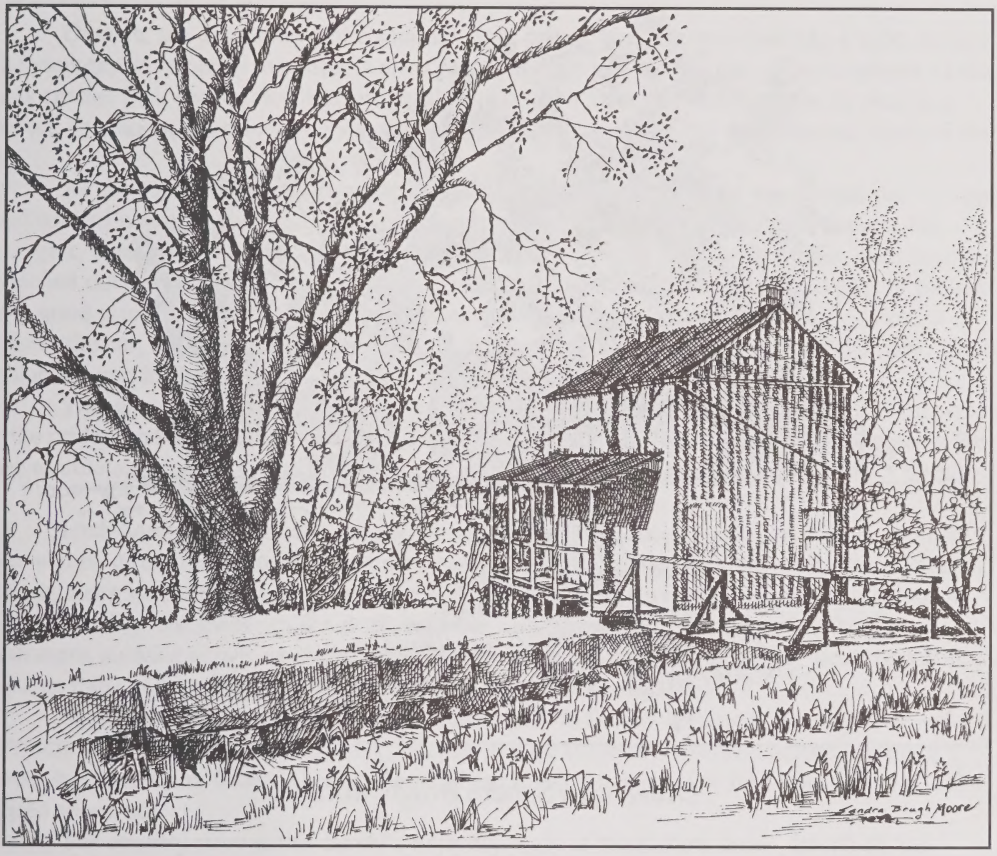
A week ago he left on one of the few journeys we have not taken together. But he is not wholly away—and I am not wholly here. We are still together.

• • •

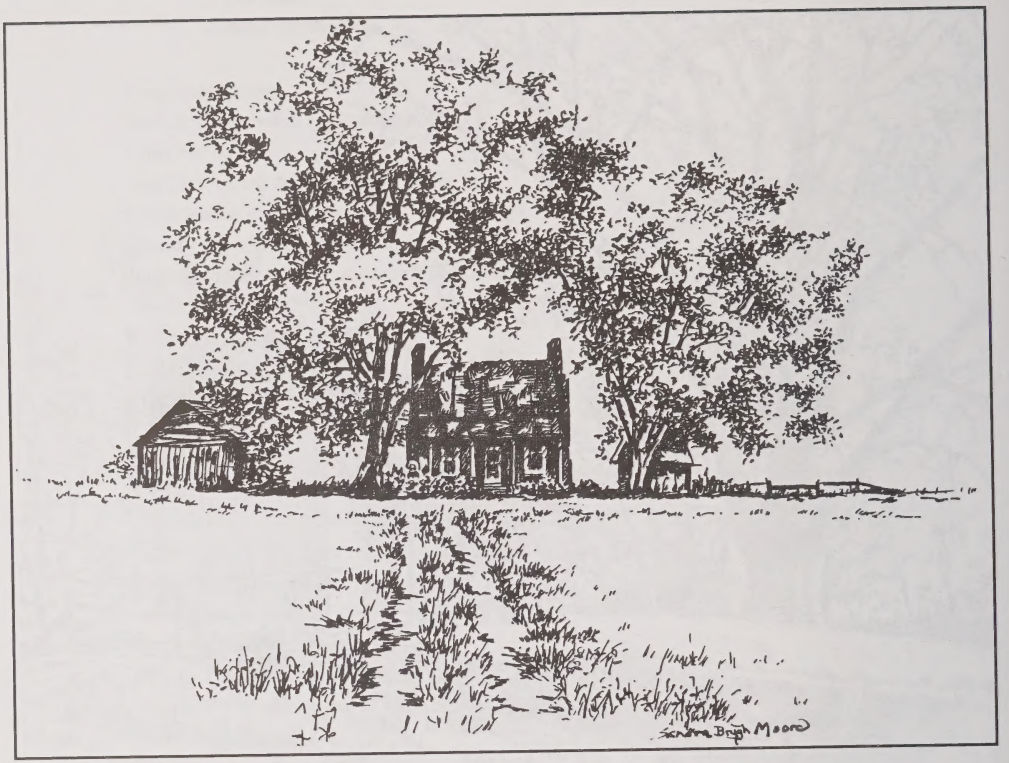
He left me a very special legacy, one that only he could have created. He explored a simple incident and made it into a metaphor for death and killing, life and love. I share his gift with you.

The Mate
James Stokely

I was only sixteen
And sat trying not to cry in the woods.
I had had no luck
And the October sun was nearly gone.
Uncle Rance, over to my right,
Already had a dozen partridges,
And Lute McSween, a quarter of a mile to the left,
A brace of ducks.
I stood up, wiped my eyes,
And tiptoed into a little clearing
With only the sound of hidden insects
To accompany my ritual stalk and breath.
Suddenly my heart leaped into my hand
As I saw a movement not fifty feet away
The sunlight filtering through the leaves
To envelop the gorgeous creature
In a golden-brown haze,
Strange, proud scion of sky and earth,
Its neck firm and erect,
Its tuft of wing flecked with a lost-world tint
Of rainbow trout in a pool of ferns.
There was no sound
But the beating of two wild hearts.
With the ancient thirst ripe within me
My finger squeezed the lock of my 20-gauge
And the long-tailed ring-necked pheasant
Surprised in its solitary foraging
Collapsed like a rag doll.
The prize was mine!
Why did I not move?
I saw something greenish-blue and red
Come running from the brush
In a frenzy of clucking
Speaking to the lump of bone, flesh, and feathers,
Seeking to lead it to safety.
Rance called from the farther hill
But I did not answer.
I looked at my gun.
The woods and the bird and I
Were equally still.



Drawing by Sandra Brugh Moore



Drawing by Sandra Brugh Moore

Moving Pictures

Nancy Dillingham

Outside, the dampness of the summer night drapes itself around them like a light sweater. The youngest is asleep in the father's arms as they all pile into the old car. The roughness of the seats against their shorts-clad legs nudges them like a cat's tongue. The night is so clear it is perfect; the moon, a distant dime's worth of cool light dropped on the smooth, dark cloth of the sky.

As the small car moves through the quiet countryside in the night air, around the curving road toward home, its dim headlights hugging the next curve, all of the children (except the youngest, who sleeps by their father on the front seat) sit on the backseat together, their bare feet stretched out in front of them on the floorboard, their fingers curled around the edges of the seat for a good grip, their heads thrown back, watching the moon out the back window. First, it follows the car, bouncing just above their heads; then it suddenly appears over to the right, hiding behind a bump in the mountain; and, finally, it leads them.

This game of watching the moon keeps them awake until they rattle over the loose planks of the bridge, move over the blackberry-lined dirt road, and grind up the rocky bank home where they tumble out sleepily to bed . . . .

Each Saturday night after supper, during the summer, they all pile into the car—except their mama, of course, who uses the time to wash or iron or clean—and drive down to the local grocery store where they watch television in Mae Ivy's living room, built on to the back of the store. Mrs. Ivy, the owner of the store, walks in and out between intervals of waiting on customers, sucking cola from a bottle. As she holds the bottle up in her white, sleeveless arm, the children think some of the cola must run directly into it, it looks so fat.

Saturday night is a busy time at the store, clusters of cars coming and going, loud voices and laughter punctuating the flickering, blue images on the small television screen, injecting themselves into Perry Como's solo as he perches casually on a stool or into Matt Dillon's stiff-legged shoot-out.

The country store is this family's Saturday night at the picture show. Barefoot, the children troop in behind their father, through the narrow walking space between the whirring freezers and shelves lined with crackers and cookies, past the bread tray, to the counters of candy, chewing tobacco, and cigarettes near the cash register, past the crowd, into the narrow door leading to the darkened living room, feeling the coolness of the concrete floor seeping into their feet and the hot, blowing air from the freezers on their bare legs, smelling the mingling of candy and tobacco and the newness of paper bags and cellophane wrapping.

The children fidget a little at first, settling in. They aren't crazy about Perry Como's musical interlude, but they sometimes recognize one of the songs because they have heard it at home when they put their ears to the small radio, pressing their hands against its warm back to keep the sound from fading out. (The radio is encased in plastic with a big crack down the middle of it where one of the children accidentally got tangled in its cord and pulled it off the high chest of drawers and broke it. They bandaged it with some black, sticky tape they found in their daddy's old tool box so that it looks now like a cracked skull, a head talking and talking out of control as they switch its dial back and forth.)

They settle down in earnest, however, for the western feature. Sometimes the harsh tales of *Gunsmoke* leave them trembling or cause them to suck a piece of ice down their throats from the cola that Daddy buys from the machine out front. But they know the tales are not real when Daddy reaches forward and pats them on their backs, laughing softly. As they sit lined up on the couch in the darkened living room, the drama of life, on-screen and off, dips in and around them (like the moon), as far removed from them as the moon they watch from the back seat of the car as it carries them safely home.

One Saturday night, when the gunshots on the screen are echoed by those outside and when suddenly there are no intervals of laughter interrupting the drama on the flickering screen, Mrs. Ivy comes through the narrow door and speaks to their father who is sitting at the end of the couch in a straight-backed chair with the sleeping baby in his arms. You better get the children out of here, she says.

The children lean forward on the couch in one motion, sucking in their breaths collectively, their little mouths forming small *O*'s. Then they all scramble up quickly and follow their daddy out through Mrs. Ivy's side door, making their way to the car parked out of the way of traffic.

As they walk, they can see a circle of overall-clad men gathered around a pick-up truck under the pools of icy-blue light from the big, round lamps that hang over the gas pumps. The men's heads jerk toward the sound, and, at the sight of four small children trailing their daddy (who carries another in his arms), their stiff, little shadows jumping up and down like soldiers behind them, the men hover closer to the truck, closing the circle, protecting it—and the children. But it is too late. The little troopers have already seen the body beside the truck.

They are just getting in the car, the father hurriedly sticking the sleeping child through the door onto the seat beside him, when the small, white ambulance arrives, followed closely by a brown sheriff's car with a gold star on its side and a flashing light on top. The light flashes across the back window of the ancient car where the children now gather, protected by its rusty shell.

But it has touched them, and that night, as they lie sleeping in their beds, it touches them again, in their dreams, sending their arms flailing, causing them to whimper softly, as the moon hovers distantly overhead.

Player Piano

Julia Nunnally Duncan

The player piano has lost its smell.
All my polishing of wood and scrubbing of ivory
have dissolved the mustiness
of decades in my grandmother's parlor.

Sometimes I dream of that front room,
the cool air and scent of mildew;
the white lace curtains
that let in shadows from the woods;
rose-patterned linoleum rug
and floral-print mohair couch
with hand-embroidered antimacassars—
a scene from the twenties,
suspended in time.

Here the piano sat,
its rubber tubing stripped for World War II,
its mechanism long destroyed;
the expression levers useless
to a child's curious fingers.
But the yellow, chipped keys
still offered a chiming sound
those Sunday evenings in the sixties
when I plunked hymns for my grandmother.

Today, in my house,
I press my nose to the closed mahogany lid
and stroke my hand across the sliding doors
that opened once to perforated rolls—
fox-trots and waltzes—
and I inhale.
Gone, though, is the smell,
except in my mind,
in my memory of that room.

CALL OF THE MILD

Cynthia Stewart

WINTER GRAY. GOTTA GET AWAY.
WHITE BEACHES BECKON. I'M COMING, I SAY.
GONNA SUN AWAY WINTER GRAY.

WINTER GRAY. GOTTA GET AWAY.
DISNEYWORLD DREAMLAND WORTH WHAT WE PAY.
GONNA PLAY AWAY WINTER GRAY.

WINTER GRAY. GOTTA GET AWAY.
BERMUDA, BAHAMAS, PERDIDO BAY.
GONNA SAIL AWAY WINTER GRAY.

WINTER GRAY. GOTTA GET AWAY.
ORCHIDS AND OCEAN, A HULA, A LEI.
GONNA SWAY AWAY WINTER GRAY.

WINTER GRAY. GOTTA GET AWAY.
BOUGAINVILLEA BREEZES WARM AS MAY.
GONNA BLOW AWAY WINTER GRAY.

WINTER GRAY. GOTTA GET AWAY.
JET PLANE AT SUNRISE
SLICES THROUGH ORANGE SKIES
TO BLUES-CHASING BLUE SKIES.
NO LONGER GRAY.
YEAH!

Silence

Celia Miles

Old Cal Carter held the record in Jackson County—and many a bet had been lost by newcomers who didn't believe it—for silence. In fact, some upstart from two counties over started calling Cal "Sil" a few years before Cal died, but the name never did catch on. Everybody was too used to Cal, and then to Old Cal.

Cal was stubborn. Everybody knew that. If he believed something, he'd not be dissuaded by facts. Nor by feelings. And he meant what he said. His word, they said, was "as good as his bond." Combine those two qualities—stubbornness and honesty—and you sometimes create a mixture that's downright awe-inspiring. Or downright silly. Depending on your view. Most men thought the first. Most women thought the second.

It started when his wife didn't get along with his dog, Shady. Amanda Carter was a big woman, handy with a scythe as well as a skillet; she knew when to speak and when to listen, generally.

Most people considered Cal Carter a lucky man when he married her. After all her daddy owned the grist mill, and Cal was assured a life-long job if he wanted it since Amanda was blessed with three sisters and no brothers. And not just three ordinary sisters who might have also married well. The oldest sister left home when the carnival came to town, took up with the mechanic who kept the rides going. She never was heard from again. The only thing people could remember about the mechanic (that's what she called him in the note she left, "the mechanic") was his exceedingly oily black hair and his very oily black hands. The next year when Mabley's Carnival came to town around Labor Day, you can bet people kept a sharp lookout for the mechanic (and May, of course). The blond teenager who kept a cigarette in his lips while he watched the Ferris wheel and the sky diver just shrugged. Except for his fingernails, though, his hands were clean.

And Barbara moped around for two years after May's disappearing act; then she up and married a widowed Bledsoe with six children under the age of thirteen from over in Yancey County. She was eighteen then. Jim Bledsoe grinned from ear to ear when Barbara hopped into his car, after the ceremony at the courthouse, with four of his kids. People wondered: did she expect him to die in a hurry and leave her the Bledsoe Farm? He was only forty-six, even if he looked as old as her grandpa.

That's when people started saying things like "What's them Sutton girls going do next?" Nobody could have predicted—that's for sure. Sarah was the quietest and the slimmest of the girls: dark, inward-looking eyes, pretty, upturned nose, long black hair. Everybody had her figured for a preacher's wife or at least a teacher's wife, if any eligible ones happened along. None did. Reverend Pickens was likely to stay at Piney Grove Missionary Baptist forever, especially since it was a part-time job and didn't pay on a regular basis. The First Methodist Church in town regularly got married pastors, and the other churches anywhere near the Sutton place had family men attached to them. Nobody paid much attention to Sarah's reading habits on the rare occasions she went to the county library, and, if she got some strange magazines in the mail, the postmaster didn't talk about them. Anyway, Sarah slipped away on the bus one spring afternoon. She, too, left a note. "I'm going to become a nun. Don't try to find me." Well, a mechanic and a chance to travel—anybody could understand that. And the security of an older,

clearly experienced man with a good-sized farm, that was certainly not unusual. But a nun? What was a nun, anyway? Sarah's parents went to the library and for help. They read about it in a big encyclopedia and they tried, at first, to explain it to their neighbors and the congregation at Piney Grove. Men scratched their heads and couldn't believe it. Something was wrong with that girl. Women used the phrase "the bride of Christ" with wonderment and soon gave up trying to picture Sarah in a convent. Even Granny Morris didn't want to think of a place where no men were allowed.

The Suttons breathed a great sigh of relief when their youngest chose Caleb Carter when she turned eighteen. His wife and their two babies had died, leaving him with a few scrubby acres and eligibility at barely thirty. He seemed like a regular fellow even if he didn't particularly like the milling business. Amanda's dad figured when the time was right (meaning when he and Caleb were older), the new husband would come around to seeing that milling offered a good life, even if you went home most days looking ghostly and the fine white flour never did wash out of the roots of your hair.

But hair was what Cal was interested in. Not four years after the wedding when the baby was not even a year old, Cal took off for Charlotte and barbering school. When he came back, he set up shop in a room off Snyder's store. He couldn't even pay for a striped barber pole for years, but gradually the men started stopping in for a haircut and found they liked the "men only" atmosphere. Pretty soon, the women folk tucked the clippers in the back of the dresser and Cal was accepted as "The Barber." He could tell a good story, listen even better, and, after the first few days, had a sure hand and steady eye. And he was honest and stubborn.

Besides barbering, Cal's main interest was his hunting dogs. He wasn't much of a hunter, but he spent lots of nights trailing the sounds of his Plott hounds, coming in exhausted in body but serene in spirit. He'd send one of the kids down to put a "closed" sign in the shop. That was one of his peculiarities. He refused to put a "closed" sign up each night when he locked the door. "Bad luck," he'd mutter. So every time he dragged in at five a.m. and didn't rouse up with the rooster's crowing and then the alarm clock, Amanda shook him awake. Sometimes he'd get up and go to the shop, sometimes he'd grunt, "Send Jamie to the shop." After the first few years, Cal knew if a customer didn't get his haircut one day, he'd get it another. Nothing to worry about. Amanda liked things more orderly, and she especially didn't like Cal's dogs.

Amanda never had liked them although Cal didn't know that until at least three months after the ink'd dried on the marriage certificate, and she especially didn't like Shady. Shady didn't slink away when she yelled. Shady liked to stay too close to the house. After ten years of marriage, Amanda took her irritations out on Shady, who was pretty old for a dog and not much use for hunting.

Cal kept the six dogs in a lot behind some trees, out of sight of the house. Amanda insisted on that. But Shady was the oldest and plenty of times when Cal was home, sitting on the porch and doing nothing, Shady lay under a tree at the edge of the yard. He did know his place; not one foot closer did he come.

Until that day when Cal and Amanda were having a noisy discussion. Nobody—not even the two of them—now knows what they started arguing about: food, a woman (not likely, was the consensus), Cal's love of hunting, Jamie's skipping school, or the howling of the hounds out back. As Mr. Sutton said, "Lord, they's so many things a lawfully wed couple can fight about, who could be expected to remember?"

The kids came out on the porch to watch as Amanda followed Cal down the steps into the clean-as-a-whistle yard. She had been getting supper and carried an iron skillet in one hand and a piece of stovewood in the other. Maybe Shady thought she'd really hit Cal, wild-eyed as she looked or maybe the shouting snapped him from a violent dream. He raised his head in the still summer air and laid his ears back. As the arguing continued and the adversaries circled in the yard, Shady uncurled himself and stood. Jamie or maybe six-year-old Laymon threw an apple core toward the dog, meaning no harm. Just for something to do since their parents were beginning to repeat themselves.

The kids do remember that as Shady began to move toward the couple, Amanda screeched something to the effect that one of these days she was going to kill somebody if he didn't watch out.

"Yeah, you and who else?" Cal wasn't particularly skilled at skirmishing with Amanda; his part was to keep the skirmish going, never expecting to win it, but hoping to tire the enemy into subsiding.

"Me and whoever it takes!" Amanda spied the rangy hound coming into her yard, something he hadn't done in years since she'd shown him the long end of a broom. "And that there dog better stay out of this yard," she yelled.

"You leave that dog alone. He ain't bothering you." Cal looked over his shoulder and stumbled over something underfoot. His kids swear their mother never touched him. Anyway he went down on one knee and Amanda flourished the skillet above his head.

Shady reached Cal and had the temerity to growl at Amanda, glaring down on Cal as she was. She backed up a step and threatened, "I'll get that dog if it growls at me again. I swear it."

"Forget the damn dog!" Cal got to his feet but even then he was a foot shorter than Amanda. He reached up to fend off the skillet which she was waving close to his ear. Shady growled again, baring his teeth.

"Get that dog away from me and this yard, Cal Carter," she said, "Or I'll hit it with this piece of stovewood."

"You hit Shady, Amanda," Cal said and then he stopped. He couldn't believe she'd threatened his dog. He started again, "You hit that dog, Amanda, and I'll—I'll never speak to you as long as I live!"

Now most men said, when they heard the kids' version of the day's activity, that Cal was mighty calm to threaten no more than that. Privately they thought (and said when they were listening to their dogs yapping through the woods on the trail of a fox or something bigger) Cal should have done more than threaten. "Words just don't get through sometimes to a woman," opined young Daniel McKee before he remembered that his father-in-law was listening. The old man spit fiercely into the fire and held on to the jug just long enough before passing it on to the boy to send a message. Another man helped young Daniel out, "Yeah, sometimes. But Cal ain't never hit a woman, never hit nobody as far as I know and I've knowed him all his life."

"You don't say things like that to a man who loves his dogs," another said, and they all nodded.

Amanda had had enough. Cal's words challenged her very soul. And the dog still had its teeth showing—in her yard! She hauled off and hit Shady with the piece of stovewood. Who knows what might have happened if Jamie and Laymon hadn't run from the porch steps to grab Shady's collar and pull him away. Amanda had done no serious damage, hitting him on the shank. And to be fair to Cal, he moved himself between the dog and Amanda in case she needed

protection. Mrs. Sutton remarked on the wisdom of that. "What dog's gonna cook you supper and warm your bed and have your younguns?" The women agreed that Cal was smart to "know which side his bread's buttered on," even if Amanda was awfully provoking to his general good nature.

Cal stood there, watching the boys settle Shady down under his tree, and Amanda stood there watching Cal. Then she turned back to the house, carrying some stovewood and the skillet. Pretty soon the fire was going and the cabbage was frying—and things had returned to normal. Except for the rest of his life Cal never spoke a word to his wife.

Oh, she tempted him. She cooked his favorite suppers. She called him "Honey" even in front of the children. For a few months, Amanda was the picture of domestic tranquility. Nothing worked. The community made bets on how long it would take Cal to give in or, if not give in, slip up and say something, anything to his wife. After a few years the oddity turned to normality in the Carter household. Three more children were born to Amanda and Cal, and the men occasionally joked about "do sounds count?" meaning lovemaking noises, but Cal wasn't saying.

Cal continued his life absolutely as before. For a while he didn't talk any more or any less to other people or to his children. Then people noticed that he talked less and less to anybody. He listened intently, nodded often, and said less and less. By the time he was sixty, he didn't say anything anytime. He became a highly proficient barber, indicating with a look or a gesture that he understood all he heard but felt no need to volunteer any comments. Talk of politics or religion or family feuds he absorbed, but his face seldom registered anger, discontent, enthusiasm, or happiness. Yet he radiated a kind of serenity that drew customers and friends alike. He made enough money barbering to support the family, what with the gardening Amanda did. The children seemed well enough adjusted. The family portrait shows the seven of them in clean, pressed dark clothes. And Amanda, too, became reconciled to the silence of Cal toward her. She could even joke about it after a few months, saying she liked the situation. Once at a quilting party, when the conversation turned to the way husbands and wives accommodate each other's behavior, Amanda said, "Well, Cal and I never have words," and the women laughed until their sides hurt.

Everybody wondered if in his old age Cal wouldn't say a few words at least to Amanda, but he never did. As he lay dying of pneumonia after being out foxhunting for two whole days and nights, Amanda sat by his bed, watching his labored breathing, occasionally wiping his lips or putting a wet cloth to them. She didn't talk to him all night, but she held his hand as he died in silence.

To Zelda

Nancy Dillingham

Zelda
in your dancing shoes
why couldn't you choose
your way to die
in the sweet summer's
sunset?

Why couldn't you
let the end come
and pick it like a choice
plum

from the off-limits tree
that grew in the shining pool
with roots in the
sky?

Photo by Peggy Higgins

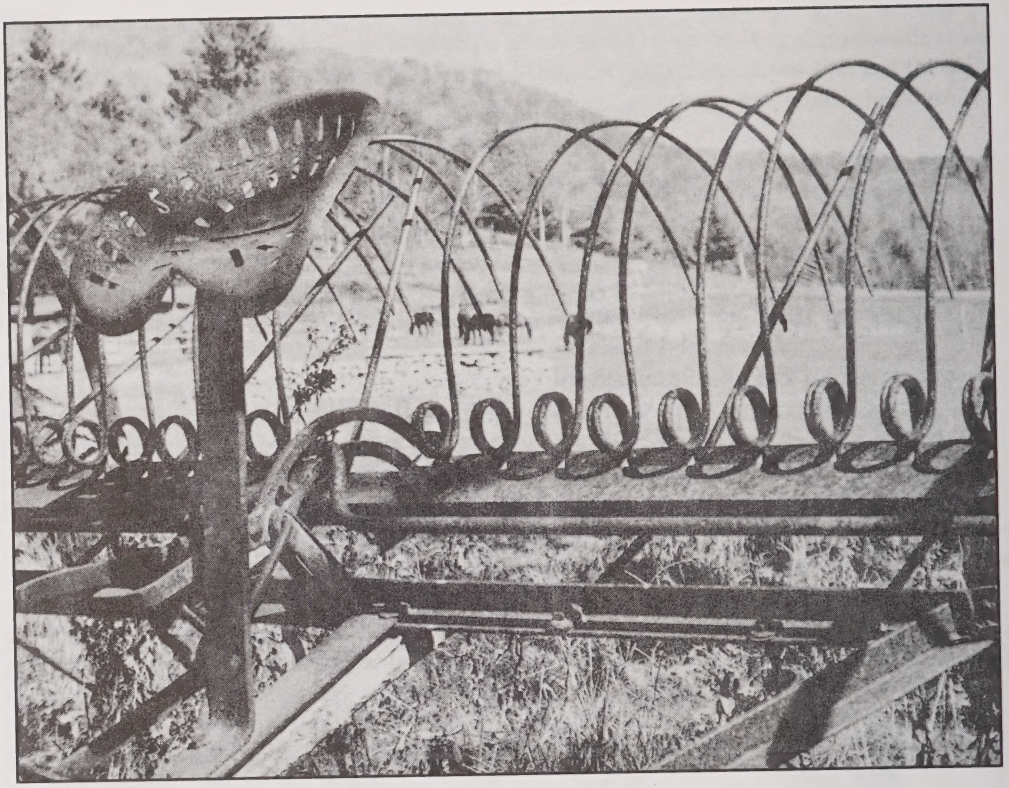


Photo by Celia Miles

Skippy

Robert Anderson

My wife and I, along with our two sons, then ages ten and twelve, were driving along the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. It was raining, and all we could see in any direction were bare mountains covered with redwood stumps and black mud. We had been camping for two weeks on the West Coast—in the rain. It was so oppressive that the kids had even stopped fighting. They were just huddled in the back of the Ford Taurus rental, slumped under their wet sleeping bags and empty Twinkie wrappers, wishing they were anywhere but with their parents, camping in the rain.

Suddenly my wife galvanized us with a bloodcurdling scream. Ahhhh! I looked over at her for some clue as to the cause; she was curled up in a ball with her feet in the seat and her hands over her eyes. I looked out at the sky and the mud and the stumps, trying to see some cause for this. I looked back at the boys, and they had come to life with their faces pressed against the foggy windows. They looked puzzled, but excited.

When I got the car back under control, and my wife had recovered enough to talk, she said, "There's a rat in the floor!" I pulled over into a log yard at a sawmill. The black mud was about four inches deep, but this was an emergency! We all jumped out of the car in the mud and rain, and I started pulling all the junk out of the car and piling it on top. The kids loved it. I thought it was just the novelty of the moment, but there were things that I didn't know at the time.

The lunch whistle blew at the mill, and the workers came out in their pickup trucks to ask what the problem was. (I know we looked sort of unusual.) When I told them my wife said that there was a rat in the car, they got out their lunch boxes and climbed on their pickups to watch the spectacle.

After cleaning out the car and feeling under the seats and dash, I couldn't find anything. When I stepped back to decide what to do next, one of the kids spied the culprit looking out of the spokes of one of the back wheels. It was a little deer mouse, brown with a white nose and white feet. He was wiggling his little nose, and I could almost see him laughing at the strange humans too dumb to get in out of the rain. We looked at him for a bit. The kids named him Skippy for a squirrel that had been screwing the lid off our Skippy peanut butter and eating it in a campground in Coos Bay.

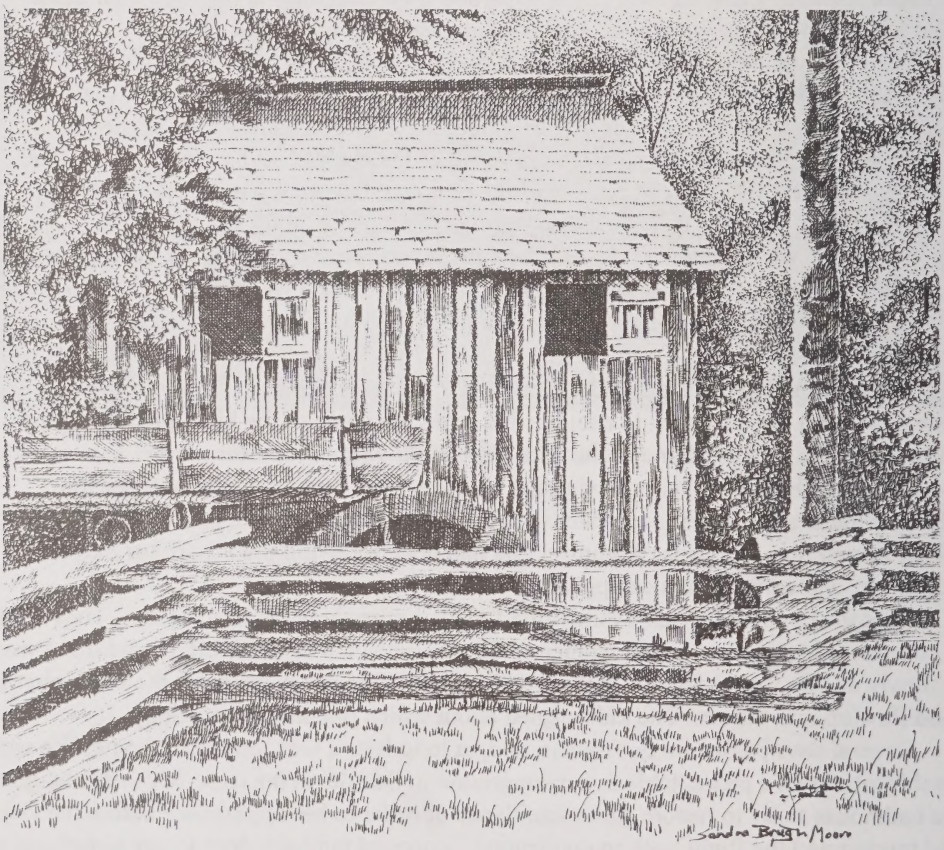
I got the children to watch him while I loaded everything back in the car. They were very concerned about what would happen to Skippy when the car took off. I said that I would start slowly and he would fall out of the wheel. As I pulled out in the road, the black clumps of mud flew up into the air. The kids argued about which one might be Skippy.

Several days passed on our travels, and, at long last, it was time to fly home. We were miserably sitting on a picnic table in a campground in Seattle, in the rain. My wife had gone to the bathhouse to try to restore some semblance of order to her appearance before the last day of touring and the flight back to civilization. I opened the back door to get something out of the back seat—and there was Skippy! He ran under the back seat, and I panicked and ripped the back seat bottom out of the car. There was a mouse's nest. Skippy ran out and up

under the back of the seat. I got a stick and started beating the back of the seat to run him out. Suddenly I had a vision of what everybody in the campground was seeing. I was leaning into the back of the car viciously beating something with a stick, while the kids were running around the car screaming, "Dad's killing Skippy!"

I got out of the car, put the seat back in, and told the kids that if they told Mom, she would not get back in the car, and we would not be able to go home, "and I'll kill Skippy!" They didn't say a word until we got to the airport.

Some years later I found out that the mouse had been with us for the whole trip up the West Coast. The boys had been hand feeding it junk food for the entire trip. As far as I know, Skippy is alive and well and living in a rental car at the Seattle Airport.



Drawing by Sandra Brugh Moore

Compromise

Nancy Dillingham

I started liking apple blossoms
that one day in April
when the lilacs got killed
again
for the I-don't-know-how-many years
in a row.

I had stopped counting
by then.
Childlike, I figured they must be delicate
or just too eager.

So I found that bright, blown morning
with the smell of lilacs a sweet memory
and the sugary spiciness of apple blossoms hitting,
that they could serve me well.

They endure.

Hack off limbs and doggedly they return
next year
with new green sprouting
in the most unlikely, unbalanced places.

They are safe,
and I break armfuls
in my quest

and leave mangled
up and down
free forms for the sun to shine
hard upon.

Photo by Celia Miles

Excerpted from *The Stone Garden*
a novel in progress

Bill Brooks

"On the following morning, the alcalde, Alejandro Segura, held an inquest on the body. Hon. M. Rudolph, of Sunnyside, was foreman of the coroner's jury. They found a verdict that William H. Bonney came to his death from a gun-shot wound, the weapon in the hands of Pat F. Garrett, that the fatal wound was inflicted by the said Garrett in the discharge of his official duty as sheriff, and that the homicide was justifiable.

"The body was neatly and properly dressed and buried in the military cemetery at Fort Sumner, July 15, 1881. His exact age on the day of his death, was 21 years, 7 months, and 21 days.

"I said that the body was buried in the cemetery at Fort Sumner; I wish to add that it is there to-day intact. Skull, fingers, toes, bones, and every hair of the head that was buried with the body on that 15th day of July, doctors, newspaper editors, and paragraphers to the contrary notwithstanding. Some presuming swindlers have claimed to have the Kid's skull on exhibition, or one of his fingers or some other portion of his body, and one medical gentleman has persuaded credulous idiots that he has all the bones strung upon wires. It is possible that there is a skeleton on exhibition somewhere in the States, or even in this Territory, which was procured somewhere down the Rio Pecos. We have them, lots of them in this section. The banks of the Pecos are dotted from Fort Sumner to the Rio Grande with unmarked graves, and the skeletons are of all sizes, ages, and complexions. Any showman of ghastly curiosities can resurrect one or all of them, and place them on exhibition as the remains of Dick Turpin, Jack Shepherd, Cartouche, or the Kid, with no one to say him nay; so don't ask the people of the Rio Pecos to believe it."—Pat Garrett.

The only showman I know of ghastly curiosities is Garrett. He shot poor Billy Barlow that night with a notched bullet and said it was me—face all gone, the poor fools believed him, the rest held their tongues and swallowed the secret. Garrett was a killer and he would murder anyone who opposed him, make no mistake about that. He wrote his own history, the way he would have you eat it.

One man had my head in a jar of brine and charged a quarter to view it. Another my finger in a box and charged a dime. Toes and belly buttons if they could. Surprised they didn't sell my pecker for a dollar. Put it on a string like a chili pepper.

I still got everything I was born with: pecker, toes, fingers and head. Unwashed by the Pecos and carried away like poor Charlie and Tom and Billy Barlow. Dig a hole and find me in it, and I'll say what Garrett said, that he killed me that night in Maxwell's with a lucky shot to the breast. Damn good shooting you ask me. One through the heart, in pitch black.

A motor car disturbs my rest.
Sun dapples through the trees
& lays an arabesque upon the walk
where children dance on outlined squares
of chalk and hop and skip and jump happily
to the tunes that play in their merry heads.

I got word Joe had died in a hotel alone, or did I mention that already? He wanted to whip Antrim's ass for taking mother from us and I was willing to pitch in and help him. Now he's died, alone, alone and I can't help him anymore. I wonder did he think of me in that last hour, or had the whisky fogged his mind or the hatred clouded his thoughts, leaving him pitching through the dark to the long cold death that awaited. Alone, alone.

Manuela and I stood on the veranda of our hotel and watched the great falls plummeting, plumes of mist rising in the air like fog or horses' breath on a frozen morning. All that water rushing felt as though it washed away the grime of my history and for a time, I was unbound, free and floating, happy again. I never saw so much water.

The first night we went out onto the veranda and saw the electric lights and heard the roar of the falls and could see them illuminated, the water blue and frothy and I wondered where it all came from, what had borne it and what force had guided it to this point where it crashed and fell over the edge, roaring, roaring like a hundred freight trains.

"Look," I said, pointing to the water below where it looked to me like the electric lights were submerged under the darkening waters and she turned and saw it too and wondered how they had gotten there.

It overtook us, the force of it and I placed my hands on her breasts and felt the tips of them go hard between my fingers as she moved against me and lowered her dress.

"Henry," she said, the power of the water drawing us together unable to resist it.

We made love there on the veranda, the great roar of the falls in our ears, the thrum of its power vibrating through us as she gave herself to me freely and recklessly in a way she never had before. And for a time I felt as though I had drawn her heart back from the grave where Charlie held it in his cold gray hands all those days and weeks and months. Her passion was a fire in me, burning, burning until my soul was consumed and the falling water washed away my sins. Afterward we lay there, our skin damp from the mist, our hair wet and tangled and slept until the night gave way to our destiny.

Garrett rides a pale horse stalking
the bones and eyes of me in his pockets
a dusty trail of lies spilling from his eyes
watchful, ever watchful for the truth of his infamy
coiled like a snake near his feet ready to strike him down.

Celsa was there and wept that day as though it was really me. And so did Paulina and Rosita and all the rest of the girls I knew and loved in Fort Sumner. Years after they would grow old knowing that it was not me Garrett had murdered (by his own confession) and dropped down deep in a hole with Charlie and Tom where we awaited the Rio Pecos to come and take us.

Manuela was not the best lover I ever had, but that night on the veranda, she was and I knew in that waning moment she would never be again. That *we* would never be again. But for that one moment, she was as a drop of rain upon my tongue, and I a man thirsting.

Consolation

Cynthia Stewart

Hi, ho, Silver. I mount my steed—
my trusty Dakota ten-speed.

I'm off to battle Dragon Despair
in sunset-soft forest air.

Filigreed trees frame a gilded sky
as sunset glory whizzes by.

Racing a stream at water's edge.
I catch last light's dance on a diamond bridge.

Woodland beauty again consoles,
calms fears that make dark doubts bold,

Brings quiet that quells Despair's fierce fire,
brings peace that proves Despair a liar.

Woodland calm conquers Dragon Despair,
drives him back to his fear-fouled lair.

I find what I seek on the forest road
Despair's undoing, Beauty's abode.

Belief Springs Eternal

Cynthia Stewart

Anyone can believe in April,
sniffing a resurrected daffodil.

And anyone can believe in the splendor of September
when leaves swirl gold
against a cobalt sky.

Fall—yes, it's the year's descent to death—
but as triumphant as that
Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem,
spirits high as palm leaves fly.

But when, in that dark Golgotha of January, a dingy sky
spits snow
while tree limbs are snapping and creaking like bones
breaking,
when birds with wind-ruffled feathers huddle together
like that flock of bewildered followers who shivered
in hopelessness at the foot of the cross,
then I, too, feel abandoned.

And when, in February, bare-boned trees shiver
under steel gray skies weeping rain,
and when hoarse winds moan like the dirges
sung by soulsick sisters
bearing burying spices to a God-forsaken sepulcher,
then I, too, have bouts with doubt.

But, when a March morning dawns paradise pretty,
radiant as the risen Christ who appeared
in that first Easter sunrise
to the few who persevered,
and when April choirs of honeybees
hum hallelujahs in my apple trees,
and when my leaf-shrouded backyard garden
reappears—erupts in a May rainbow of colors—
a promise forgotten in the dark of December,
then my doubts are rolled away like the stone at the tomb,
my faith returns again on the wings of my fair-weather,
feathered friends,
my belief is borne again on June's grape iris breath
and eternal life seems a gift again,
not a sentence.

I'll Be Right Back, Sweetie: A True Story

Greta W. Clark

At 8 o'clock I tripped up the steps to my office with my morning's first cup of coffee and sausage biscuit, only to trip on the top step, pitching forward and catching myself with my right hand. After I recovered from the shock of watching my first cup of coffee trickle down the steps and looked around to see if anyone saw me fall, I checked myself out to see if I was injured. To my dismay, my little finger was protruding at an upward angle—it wasn't a pretty sight. But I hadn't torn a run in my stockings.

I gathered up my things, including the empty coffee cup, and went inside. My co-workers and I unanimously agreed that my finger needed attention. Linda came to my rescue and took me to an urgent care center. (I should have stopped for coffee on the way.)

I was telling the person behind the glass window what had happened . . . . Have a seat, please, and fill out these forms. You know the routine—medical history, one form with about 50+ questions, insurance information, release for treatment, who to notify in case . . . . Linda filled them out, signed them for me, and returned them to the person behind the glass window. It was now about 8:30.

Ms. Clark? Come with me. How did you do that, sweetie? I fell. Does it hurt? A little. Where did you fall? At work. Do you have worker's comp coverage? Yes. Who should I call to verify that? Ms. Smith. Ms. Smith, this is the urgent care center and I have Greta Clark here in my office. She said she fell at work. Will your worker's comp cover her injury? I guess she said yes, because they continued with the routine—listened to my heart, took my temperature, took my blood pressure (normal). Have you eaten anything today? No. (I didn't think she needed to know about the coffee.) Are you allergic to any medicines? Not that I'm aware of. Next of kin? And what seemed like a million other questions. Have a seat in here and we'll get x-rays. After the x-rays I sent Linda to the waiting room. By then I was very cold. I was almost shivering and thinking about the spilled coffee.

About 9:30 a doctor came in, told me he looked at the x-rays, that I had dislocated my little finger, and that he was making me an appointment to see a hand surgeon, and that he hadn't seen an injury quite like it and wouldn't consider trying to reset it. I'll be back in a few minutes to let you know about the appointment with the hand surgeon. OK. He came back in about fifteen minutes. It seemed like an hour with my being cold and hungry and needing a cup of coffee.

I arrived at the Hand Center about 10:00, waited about 10 minutes, filled out more forms—one with 50+ questions. Do you have worker's comp? Yes. Who should I call to verify that? Ms. Smith. Ms. Smith, this is the Hand Center and I have Greta Clark here in my office. She said she fell at work. Will it cover this? Have you eaten anything? No, nothing, I said. By then I wasn't thinking about the coffee. I was into something that wasn't going to include a cup of coffee or a sausage biscuit right away. While I was answering her questions, I overheard a doctor, in a very agitated voice, say, I can see her if she's already here—I'm leaving in a few minutes. She's ready. Come with me, sweetie—the nurse said that, not the doctor. The forms would have to wait; he was in a hurry.

Around 10:30 I was put in an examining room. A person took my temperature and my blood pressure (normal). How did you hurt your hand, sweetie? Fell. Does it hurt? A little. What have you had to eat or drink today? Nothing. Are you allergic to any medications? Not that I'm aware of. The doctor will be with you in a minute. She left the door open and I could see the doctor, who seemed to be darting from one examining room to another, shaking his head as if everyone was doing the wrong thing. He mumbled something about needing to leave. (I wanted to leave, too). The nurse came back once. Are you OK, sweetie? Yes.

The doctor came whizzing in about 10:45, seemingly agitated because I was there, but I guess other things were irritating him. Although, he was very nice and gentle and carefully explained everything he was doing. How did you injure your hand? Does it hurt? Have you eaten today? Fell. A little. No. (And I thought of the cup of coffee I watched trickle down the steps.) He described the injury, telling me he was pretty certain he could not put it back in joint, but he would try. Are you allergic to any medications? Not that I'm aware . I'll numb your finger. It will hurt a little, but I'll be as gentle as possible. I felt a little uneasy having him do this while he was in a bad mood and wanting to leave. He, as gently as possible, stuck in the needle (big needle), poking it in every direction possible. Now it hurt more than just a little. I'll be right back.

The doctor came back with a nurse. To the nurse he said, You hold her wrist and other three fingers while I try to reset. Nurse, he said, while throwing himself back in his chair like he was giving up (don't give up now I thought), how can I get to her finger if you are going to do it like that? Nurse looked him square in the face and said with authority, as nurses usually do, You tell me where you want me to be and how you want it held and I'll do just that. So he got her situated the way he wanted her and asked me if I was ready. I wasn't, but said I was. It felt as though (I didn't watch) he stretched my little finger two inches longer than it was. The thought actually went through my mind that he might pull it off or break it—a sickening thought. It wasn't as numb as I would have liked. After a lot of pulling and stretching, he said I just can't reset it. You will need surgery. He said he couldn't do the surgery for another two or three hours, that he had to leave his office, and that the surgery should be done right away. I believe another doctor can do it; he is in surgery now downstairs. He can do it here in the Center. I'll find out if he can do it. I'll be back in a few minutes. The nurse brought the other unfinished forms, which I signed with my left hand. I couldn't read my own signature, but she seemed satisfied with it. Incidently, my finger was now at a different angle, but not in joint.

My harried doctor returned about 11:00. Yes, my colleague can do it as soon as he gets out of surgery in about 30 minutes. He will do the surgery right here in the Hand Center. He will give you something to relax you and numb your arm. You should be finished about 2:00. I told Linda she could leave. I called a friend who lives about an hour away with nothing better to do than enjoy my day with me, and he said he would arrive about 2:00 to take me home.

A nurse said, Come with me, we'll go downstairs and get you ready for surgery. A different nurse took my temperature, listened to my heart, took my blood pressure (still normal). We filled out more forms. I was getting better writing with my left hand. How did

you hurt your hand, sweetie? Bless your heart. Have you eaten? Good, you probably won't get sick.

I was put in a room on an examining table. Little booties were put over my shoes, a little bonnet over my hair, and a gown over my clothes. Another form was filled out. Have you eaten anything today. No. That's good. Maybe you won't get sick. The surgeon will be here in a few minutes. Sorry you hurt your hand and have to spend your day like this. That's OK. I didn't want to go to work today anyway.

Another nurse came in around 11:30. Are you OK, sweetie? I nodded. Have you eaten anything today? No. Good, you probably won't get sick. (I thought of the coffee and sausage biscuit—I would have risked it.) I'm getting ready to put patches on you to monitor your heart during surgery. She stuck little patches around on my chest and left. I lay down on the examining table and dozed off. What else could I do? I hadn't had my first cup of coffee. But it won't be long now; it will be over at 2:00.

In a few minutes the anesthetist came in to check me out before surgery. He took my blood pressure (still normal) and pulse rate. Have you eaten anything today? Good, you probably won't get sick. Are you allergic? And on and on. I'll give you something to relax you before surgery and numb your arm and hand. He shuffled through all my forms. I'll see you in a few minutes. So everything was set; the surgery will be over at 2:00.

About noon, a nurse came back in. (I had seen so many, I didn't know if she was different.) Are you cold? Yes? She covered me with a blanket. I got warm and dozed off while I was thinking about the coffee and wondering if someone had eaten my biscuit. I could doze. I hadn't had coffee. For the next thirty minutes or so, I had several more visits from different people asking me, Are you OK, sweetie? Yes, I'm fine, I'm just relaxing while I wait.

About 1:15, a new person (not a nurse) came in. I'm sorry this is taking so long, but we just learned that the anesthetist had to leave, and we aren't going to be able to do the surgery here. She must have been their PR person because she did a good job of making it sound routine for an anesthetist to leave right before a scheduled surgery. You will have to have it done at the hospital. I'll take you to the surgeon's office and he will explain everything. While I was removing my booties, bonnet, and gown, another nurse came in. The nurse already there asked the new nurse, Where is the form she signed giving consent for treatment. It was there with the other papers. I can't find it. And I said, The anesthetist was here; maybe he took it. I'll sign another one if you need it. I thought, Why not? Just one more form. I don't want to get the nurse in trouble. The doctor is already in a not-so-good mood.

On the way to the surgeon's office, I passed the reception area. I said, If my friend comes in, tell him where I am. Please have a seat and the surgeon will be here in a few minutes. It was extremely cold in his office. I had gotten use to the little booties, bonnet, and gown keeping me warm. I wished I still had them on.

My friend was right on time to pick me up. By then I knew it was going to take a little longer than I had thought. I filled him in on the change in plans before the surgeon came back.

The surgeon arrived and explained to me about the anesthetist leaving and the plans for doing the surgery at the hospital. He said arrangements had been made to operate about 5:00. He put a temporary cast on my hand so I wouldn't hurt it before the surgery. May we leave and go to the hospital at 5:00? No, he said, you need to go directly to the hospital. It will take a little while to check you in, and don't eat anything. (That meant no coffee.) We arrived at the hospital about 2:30. Please have a seat over there in the waiting room, we'll be with you in a few minutes.

Ms. Clark? Would you follow me, please? Have a seat. I had to start from the beginning as though I had just arrived with my injury. Does it hurt? A little. Where? At work. What time? 8:00 this morning. Can you hear me, sweetie? That did it! One sweetie too many! I said, in a not-so-friendly voice, I didn't come here because of my hearing; I dislocated my finger. She apologized and said there was so much noise she wasn't sure I could hear her. I had answered all her questions; how did she think I did that if I couldn't hear? Maybe I gave the wrong answers. Anyway, being the basically nice person I am under better circumstances, I apologized and weakly tried to explain that I had already answered the same questions twice. (I didn't mention the coffee trickling down the steps.) I know, she said, but we can't use any documents from the Hand Center. We must get our own information. Are you allergic? Have you eaten? Do you have? Who should I call? Ms. Smith, this is Mercy Hospital, I have Greta. She said she fell. Will it cover?

About 3:00—Mrs. Clark? Come with me, sweetie. Another person listened to my heart, took my temperature, took my blood pressure (still normal). Have a seat in here and the anesthetist will see you in a few minutes.

Ms. Clark, this is the anesthetist. How are you Ms. Clark? Have you eaten anything today? No. Good, you probably won't get sick. Are you allergic to any medicines? Not that I'm aware of. And on and on. And some new questions. When you are ready for surgery, we'll give you something to relax you and put you to sleep. For the first time that day, I felt a little anxiety. I said, I thought it would just involve numbing my arm. No, we have to put you to sleep in the hospital. He quoted the odds on anything going wrong. They weren't good enough. I wanted his promise that I would be OK. As I was leaving his office, he said, You'll be OK. I felt better. Please have a seat across the hall. In a few minutes someone will come to get you for an EKG. (I stopped thinking about the coffee and sausage biscuit.)

Ms. Clark? Follow me. Take off all your clothes and put on this gown and get in bed and someone will come in to do an EKG. Another person came in with the EKG machine, opened my gown and said, You already have patches on your chest. (They didn't remove them before I left the Hand Center). Can you use them for this EKG? No, we have to use our own because they are different. As she began pulling them off, she said, You must have sensitive skin; they are leaving little red rings. No comment from me. Believe it or not, the EKG was normal.

About 4:00, I was rolled to another room to wait for surgery. A nurse came in to take my temperature, blood pressure (still normal), and pulse rate. She said she would have to insert an IV and draw some blood. I reluctantly gave her my hand. She began inserting the needle in the back of my hand and moving it around. She said my vein was moving and she couldn't get it in. She said, I'll be right back, sweetie. She left the needle (big needle)

hanging out of the back of my hand. I smiled—yes, I did. Finally she came back with a nurse who got the needle in the vein, but said she hadn't used that type before, and the other nurse would have to finish the connection. She did. She didn't ask me if it hurt. I was still smiling and so was my friend. Are you all right, sweetie? My arm feels cold. She understood and gently covered me with a preheated blanket. We were left alone to wait. There were some comings and goings to check on me.

The surgeon showed up right on time, 5:00 p.m. At around 6:30, I awoke with a cast on my hand. Everything was OK. I had no pain. I wasn't sick. I felt so good I really didn't care what they did to me then. Can we get you anything? I said I would love to have a hot cup of coffee. They brought me a nice cup of hot coffee and a delicious muffin. What a nice ending to a long and frustrating day. And my blood pressure was still normal. And I didn't have a run in my stockings. Doesn't take a lot to please me.

The surgeon said, You may get dressed and leave now, Mrs. Clark. At 7 p.m. my friend and I left the hospital. As I left I smiled at the nurses and doctor and said, I enjoyed spending the day with you.

Drawing by Sandra Brugh Moore

Photo by Celia Miles
Drombeg Circle near Carberry, Ireland

Circles and Stones

Celia Miles

Something about stones
enduring sonnets of soil and pain
nexus of natural and artifice created
sings to the secret in all of us.
Something about stones
regardless of sharp turns, divided minds
speaks of the open beyond all of us.
Something about stones
reminds us of the infinite
declares man's hope of mastery
by worship or by knife blade.
Something about stones
stays, silent speakers from somewhere.

And
Something about circles
odes swaying, coming back whole
saving mass from chaos in man or poem
Circles feel safe, circles warm the child in us
Something about circles
keeps us enclosed just as a tree
takes its circles upward and the
sinkhole downward, swirling
and curling,
Something about circles
attaches to stones especially
to spin us deep and inward.

Drawing by Cheryl Andrews

Learning to Teach

David Holcombe

When I was in Miss Lassie Morgan's class in the fourth grade, I first became aware of the purpose of education. Until then learning was a game for me—like puzzles. Everything was to find a part and figure something out—like reading a sentence or solving a math problem. In Miss Lassie's class everything was related to the real world: multiplication tables were used to solve time and space problems, social studies topics were taken from *Time* magazine's coverage of current events and international figures like Joseph Stalin, science was studied in relation to the physics of the Los Alamos atomic bomb tests—with pictures from *Life*, and *everything* was a reading and a writing assignment.

When I entered college, I was fortunate to have class with wonderful professors like Dr. Ella J. Pierce, who told me frankly that I wasn't producing college level work and then proceeded to teach me how to be a student, and Dr. Virgil R. Gray, Jr., who became my mentor in graduate school and showed me that I had capabilities far beyond my own limited sense of possibilities. *The people who inspired me to seek a career teaching on the college level are the people who showed me the value of a life filled with the pursuit of truth and knowledge and the absolute necessity of sharing this truth and knowledge with others.*

Two years after finishing my Bachelor of Arts degree at Mars Hill College I returned to that institution as a full-time faculty member, having completed my Master of Arts degree. Since I had been away for only a short time, the first class I met had not only my former roommate but also an old girlfriend on the roll. At that time I was very sure that I *didn't* know very much about being a college instructor. Since then I have had nine full-time years as well as five full-load adjunct years of experience. I believe that I am beginning to understand what I can help students accomplish in the classroom.

When I came to Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College as an adjunct instructor ten years ago, I discovered better students than I had been privileged to teach at either Mars Hill or Converse. The students here often weren't as well prepared academically but were more capable of success for one compelling reason—*they wanted.* These were not only younger students straight out of high school but also older adults who had been out into the world and were now returning to school valuing and desiring education—*they wanted.* I was amazed at the distance of the progress I would witness in a student over a mere two years—*they wanted*!

I realized very soon that the purpose of a community college teacher was not just to impart knowledge in the abstract like the university professor, but the purpose of the community college instructor was to create a successful college student—sometimes from a student with little prior success. My role would be to stimulate and guide these students. I knew the attributes of a competent student; my purpose became to teach success along with curriculum content. Comments about performance—even poor performance—must have a positive effect. As a teacher of public speaking and composition, I must evaluate work in areas where students are often insecure and vulnerable. I seek to comment on the merits of each piece of work as well as *ways to improve the work*, not *what is wrong* with the work. This reinforcing and constructive nurturing can take place only in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. I attempt to get to know each student personally and individually so that an atmosphere of friendly trust can help to ease the

stress which many students feel while learning. I try to let my students feel that I am here to help them, not to harm them or take away their grade. With trust, they are free to explore and experiment as they *earn* their grades.

Our College's former mission statement reveals that our purpose is "to meet students at their ability and to assist them in attaining realistic educational goals." Despite college placement testing, each student enters our classrooms with different abilities and needs. I find that I can begin to be an effective instructor only when each student feels that I am acquainted with him or her as an individual. I make a point of learning names within the first week of class. To accomplish this, I put the students in groups of three or four on the second day of class. The first three or four students alphabetically from the class roll make the first group, the second three or four students alphabetically make the second group, and so on. I go around to each group while they are working on an assigned task and ask what name each student prefers to be called by—and then I learn the names on the spot in groups of three or four. This way I am able to quickly reenforce names when I call the roll each day. When working with students in class, I make a point of calling them by name at every opportunity, and I look for opportunities outside of class when I see students to call them by name. This simple task of using names helps to establish trust and a feeling on the part of the student that I as a teacher care about him or her as an individual.

Education has "hit the fast lane" in the late 1990's. Computer classrooms, video projectors, PowerPoint laptops as well as voice-mail and e-mail are now a part of the classroom. I first put my Internet address on my course syllabi for winter quarter of last year. At that time, I did not expect that any of my students would use it. However, I have been surprised to find that the Internet is just another tool and technique that I am able to use. Students send me sections of papers with questions which I can answer—on documentation or grammar dilemmas—as easily as they can ask questions by dropping by the office, perhaps more easily, especially if they are working on their papers in a computer lab across campus. I am also able to give students net addresses on MLA style, research addresses, and search engine advice to help in classroom assignments.

Teaching English, speech, theater, and film is becoming a new experience in the electronic age. I am excited to be working with community college students at this revolutionary moment, but I am constantly aware that it is communication theory, critical thinking and analysis, rhetorical strategies, organizational skills, and editing that I am at the College to teach. I believe we who teach in these fields must never allow technology to become more than just the media tools for rigorous and top standard communication techniques. *I hope that I can always help to make our students masters of the idea, first.*

Encounter in Amsterdam

Peggy Higgins

I first noticed his shoes, butter soft, golden brown, slightly worn heels. I saw them clearly as he fled up the steep corridor ahead of me in mad pursuit of the last train from Amsterdam to Skipol Airport. He started to veer off in the wrong direction and, after I caught up with him, I told him so. He was so grateful that he insisted on paying my train fare, first class, at that, when I'd been planning on stretching my budget only as far as a second class seat. The voluptuous richness of his skin and features looked more in keeping with the lush jungles of India or some other tropic subcontinent than the damp, thin chill of northern Europe on the day after Christmas, but the cashmere overcoat he wore—butter yellow to match the shoes—showed that he had lived north of the Equator long enough to adapt to its harsher weather.

He asked if I were European, a question guaranteed to stroke the ego of any would-be-sophisticated American woman. I paused for a second to preen the bogus chic veneer that I had apparently acquired after three months abroad, and then I owned up to my more pedestrian southern American origins. He, too, was not what he seemed, neither Brahmin caste Hindu nor Dutch Indonesian trader. He was, he said, a Canadian, and I could call him "Bill."

Simultaneously, he handed me the obligatory business card, but the name engraved there bore no immediate resemblance to the one he had given me.

"My parents moved to Toronto from Bombay when I was a child," he explained, seeing my confusion. "In my business it's simpler to give a Westernized name," he added.

"And what is your business?" I asked.

"Oh, I do a number of things, but I guess you could say I'm in the publishing business. We print mostly textbooks and technical books," he said.

"How interesting," I said, automatically.

Those words turned out to be the "Open, sesame," that kept "Bill" talking, with the occasional interjection of a "Hmm" or an "Ah" from me, for the rest of the train ride. He was, it seemed, a man of many facets: publisher, gourmet cook, traveler, and single, very single. And not particularly bothered that I was not. After all, the Netherlands were a long way from North Carolina, or Toronto, for that matter. Fortunately for me, the distance between Amsterdam and the airport was a good deal shorter.

Knowing that these circuitous advances, if that's what they were, would be over in no more than a half an hour or so, and also knowing that nothing much could happen in a train compartment with a glass door, I settled down to enjoy the experience.

For that moment in time I was not the person I was at home. I instead cast myself in the role of Mysterious Foreign Woman on a Train, not the Orient Express, maybe, but as close as I was likely to get. And then it hit me. My traveling companion was playing a role, too. By the time we reached our destination, we were both quite comfortable in our chosen parts and maybe a little sorry to have the "play" come to an end. I put his card into my coat pocket and forgot about it until the following winter, when, sliding my hand in to retrieve a glove, I came upon its still-crisp edges. At first I didn't connect the foreign name with my railroad co-star, and then in a flash I was there, again, on the train leaving Amsterdam.

White lightning, planes, and such

Nancy Dillingham

He wore white bucks
and traveled light.

In a big orange bird
he took his flight.

He drank hard
and cut a rug in the sky.

People cried:
Hey, look at him fly,

flipping and zipping,
spitting fate in the eye.

He's over Vestal's now
putting on a show for the old folks,

cutting the motor in a free fall,
buzzing the telephone pole.

Stock-still they stood
in their yards

looking upward,
shading their eyes from the sun,

listening to the plane's drone
long after its Sunday afternoon ritual was done

and it had flown out of sight
over the hills towards home.

• • •

The dots on the ground elongate themselves
in quicksilver motions, pointing to the sky,

their bird-like mouths reaching for his golden glory
(they're on country ground; they can't rise).

One of these days he'll kill himself
without the thrill of white lightning, planes, and such—

he'll die like all of us,
without a fuss.

Come and rest, orange bird.
Come and shelter yourself.

Photo by Celia Miles

Opening the Door

Julie Thompson

It was a typical registration day at Blue Ridge Community College . . . blue sky with just a hint of fall in the air, masses of people bustling about with a thousand different questions. I was in my usual registration duty station—the lobby of the Patton Building. My role as "registration traffic cop" was to direct people into the appropriate line or to the appropriate building. I was bombarded with questions. "Where's the bookstore? What do I do after I get an advisor's signature? Where is the placement test being given? Who do I see for financial aid? Where do I register? Can you tell me where the restroom is? What if I can't pay today? Would you hold my baby while I talk with my advisor?"

As the morning wore on and the crowds situated into the appropriate lines, the lobby, although still crowded, was no longer massed with people. It was then that I noticed him, an older man in his sixties—a farmer, I guessed—his face tanned and weathered. He wore bib overalls, a faded plaid shirt, and work boots. He was a large man, over six feet tall with huge, rough hands. He could have commanded quite a striking presence, but it was evident he was uncomfortable in this situation. He fidgeted in a corner of the lobby, sometimes sitting on a bench, sometimes standing and pacing. I assumed he was a parent or grandparent of one of the students registering for classes. I noticed him watching me from across the lobby, but when I tried to maintain eye contact, he would look away.

When the crowds thinned enough for me to leave the registration table, I walked over to him and asked if I could help. He flushed, looked away nervously as if he wanted to run, then turned to me. I will never forget that moment or his eyes—piercing blue, full of fear and embarrassment yet dignified. "Is this where you go to learn to read?" he asked.

All of the registration chaos seemed to disappear. It was just the two of us, eye to eye, soul to soul. I took his large hand with both of mine, shook it, and tried to convey with my eyes the admiration I felt for him. "Yes, sir," I said, "you have definitely come to the right place." I left my registration post, took him back to my office, and arranged for an appointment with a member of the Literacy Council. I don't know what happened to the old gentleman, whether or not he learned to read. I can't even remember his name. But I'll never forget him or that moment.

It made me realize how very difficult and *courageous* it is for someone to admit a weakness, seek help in overcoming it, and in doing so, open up a whole new world. It also made me proud to work for a community college whose purpose is to serve the educational needs of the people in its community, no matter where they need to begin.

Auntie

Nancy Dillingham

The summer that Daddy moved them in, everybody said that he shouldn't allow Auntie (she was no one's aunt; yet everyone called her that) and her son to live in the bottom in the little house. (Daddy let them live there, rent free, in return for the son's help on the farm.) Furthermore, they said, Mother shouldn't let us children be around them because it was rumored that the son had had TB since he now began every sentence by clearing his throat. Uh-hem, he would begin, and then he would finish what he was saying.

Auntie was said to be a witch, and most of the children were afraid of her. She did look like one with the myriad of wrinkles on her aged face and a huge, brown, soft-looking mole on the side of her somewhat hooked nose with its flat, flaring nostrils. But we were only slightly afraid of her, and when she walked, or rather hobbled, by our house in her shapeless dress of an indeterminate gray, which reached down to her swollen, misshapen ankles and which was covered with three or four faded-out aprons, we followed at a distance, companionably silent.

The only person Auntie visited was my aunt who would talk to anyone, she was so lonesome. She and Auntie would sit under the large shade tree by the side of the house and dip snuff. (Auntie taught us how to make a brush—she used hers for dipping; we used ours for brushing our teeth or for "dipping" cocoa and sugar from a lid. First, you cut off a piece of birch, take a sharp knife and cut up through the peeled part like you would an onion you were going to dice. Finally, you chew this end until it is soft.)

Snuff came in glasses that were later reused for putting up jelly or drinking milk. Most of the womenfolk who dipped took out small amounts and carried it, for convenience, in little tins in their bosoms or aprons. Auntie and my aunt would take out these containers, tapping on the top all the way around to dislodge the powder from the lids so as not to spill it when they opened it up. After opening the tin carefully, they took the birch brush, softened it with spittle, and swabbed it in the snuff. When the brush was thinly coated, they placed it into the sides of their mouths—in Auntie's case, between the gap in the front of her mouth where several teeth were missing. Sometimes, if they didn't have a birch brush, they would use a little spoon for dipping, heaping it up, then placing its contents in the lower lip so that the lip protruded like it was swollen, their bottom teeth filling with the amber juice. Then they would put the lid back on, snap the tin shut, and slip it back into their bosoms or their aprons, sit back in their rockers, cross their legs, and talk and spit and dip.

Auntie could cross her legs and still place both feet on the ground, a feat we had never seen accomplished before. When she crossed her legs, we could sometimes see her cotton stockings knotted just below the knee. Both she and my aunt were superstitious, and they often enthralled us with stories of people dying after a rooster crowed at sunset or about someone being chased off the mountain by a racer black snake that suspended itself in the air like a wave or about someone's cow giving bloody milk after they stepped on a grand-daddy.

As I said, we were a little bit afraid of Auntie, yet curiously drawn to her somehow. She taught us a chant that could make doodle bugs come out of the dirt mounds:

"Doodle bug, doodle bug,
come up, come up;
your house is on fire,
and your children all burning up."

Twice that summer we went through the bottom to the small shack where she lived. Once we sat on the stoop with her in the sun, listening to her talk in her rather coarse, flat voice. We never talked. Once she took us inside, although we had been forbidden to go any further than the door when we went with messages for the son about work that needed to be done—kindling split or tobacco plants pulled. Since it was summer, the fire was out in the fireplace, but a black pot sat to the side on the hearth still steaming, smelling of soup beans. There were only two rooms in the shack—a small kitchen and a living room crammed with two small, iron beds and boxes stacked everywhere. From under one of the beds, she pulled an ancient, black trunk with tarnished hinges. She opened it up, and it was filled with mementos—a black, cut-glass necklace; a pink satin sachet pillow with an empty, fancy perfume bottle; the wooden leg of her other son who had lost a leg in the Second World War; letters and postcards. He went to all them "furrin" countries, she said as she held up a scalloped postcard with a picture of a huge tower. I felt like I had been transported to an exotic place. It was the same sensation I later experienced when I saw the film version of *Treasure Island* in the little dusty-green audiovisual room at grammar school. I can still see the opening scene where the little boy comes up a windy, winding trail to the tavern, lifts the knocker, and bangs on the door. From that moment on, a strange, mysterious world opens up. I can still see the sinister way the pirate sliced up an apple and feel the rocking of the ship and the creaking of the wood as they stepped aboard and hear the coarse croaking of the parrot with the shiny, green feathers as it perched on the pirate's shoulder.

That was the last time I saw Auntie. I heard Daddy and Mother talking conspiratorially in the kitchen one day. The next night we awoke to a huge fire burning in the bottom. The shack was ablaze. For a moment, before I was fully awake, the fiery light through the bedroom window startled and frightened me so much that I thought it was the "end of time" that I had heard so much about from the pulpit of our church during Sunday preaching and revivals or tent meetings. *Fire and brimstone shall destroy the earth* reverberated through my head, and I shook all over as I stood, a few minutes later, with my parents and sisters in front of our picture window and watched the fire shoot upward in great orange balls. I was horrified thinking that Auntie and her son had indeed been taken up in a great cloud of fire. Daddy didn't seem particularly worried and tried to reassure me. I was puzzled, for I had seen the horseplay and wisecracking and easy camaraderie between my father and the son.

The next day I was all prepared to see the bones or skeletons of Auntie and her son in the smoldering rubble. We poked gingerly in the remains of the shack with tobacco sticks, but all we could find was a piece of melted glass. I wondered if this was Auntie's empty perfume bottle. I imagined the flames licking the letters and postcards, and I mourned Auntie's loss.

After we questioned her and bothered her so much for answers, Mother finally told my sisters and me later that people in the community had threatened to burn the shack and its contents because they constituted a health hazard if Daddy didn't move Auntie and her son away. When he could take it no longer, Daddy had finally given in. He had secretly and quietly moved Auntie and her son in the middle of the night the day before he, himself, had set the shack on fire.

For several months after that, gossip and rumors were rampant. Whenever they could, people would corner my sisters and me—in the churchyard, at the store, at the little post office down the road—and try to question us about Auntie. We told them that on the night of the fire we had watched her and her son ascend into heaven in a cloud of fire. They looked askance at us and went away, mumbling or shaking their heads. Soon word was out that Auntie had cast a spell on us, that we were now "tetched," wild children that other children should stay away from. But all the children loved our stories, and we often laughed under the covers at night as we compared the tall tales we had concocted that day.

We didn't ask where Daddy had taken Auntie, but some time later as we were looking at the suckers and fireballs and jawbreakers in the glass containers lined up on the cabinet of the store, one of our neighbors came in looking like he had seen a ghost. He was white and shaken, and his voice was hoarse and queer as he told the storekeeper that he had just seen Auntie or her spirit walking up the road on the way to town. She looked hardly changed at all, he said, except that she had a red rag tied on her head, probably to cover the baldness where the fire had singed off her hair. We came up behind him then, thrusting our pennies out to the storekeeper. He took them hurriedly and put our choices in a little brown paper bag. They both stared at us like we were prophets like Jeremiah or Obadiah or something. We walked solemnly out of the store, very dignified, the screen door that read in orange letters "Colonial is Good Bread" banging behind us. Not until we were out of sight up the road did we double up with laughter.

For the rest of the summer, we had a field day with that story, embellishing it at every opportunity, creating imaginary meetings between Auntie and other members of the community. We were particularly graphic when recounting her vision of the Gates of Hell.

Drawing by Sandra Brugh Moore

Slingshot

Julia Nunnally Duncan

He may have scared other children from his yard,
thrown rocks at their dogs,
and threatened to call the pound.
He might have summoned the law on his neighbors
for allowing a tree limb to fall on his land
or chickens to wander into his garden—
this may all be true.
But for me he made a slingshot,
cut the fork of a laurel tree,
whittled notches with cigarette-stained fingers,
attached strips of rubber, an old shoe tongue,
and sat with me in his porch swing
to show me how to aim it.

For me he told tales of fishing
in the Catawba River
and fried catfish that he'd caught,
inviting me to sit at his table
with him and his wife.

Yet I still hear stories of his meanness,
ill will toward neighbors,
so hard for them to understand
of a Baptist deacon.

But in my mind I see
him grin sidewise at me,
pretending to pull a nickel from my ear
or crack a flea—*click*—
between his thumbnail and fingernail
and then pinch my ear lobe
—gently—
for good measure.

Insight

Parker Lewis

There is a place in a very lonely part of the world that has left such an impression on me that I sincerely doubt I will ever be able to forget it. Up a ribbon of highway in the heart of the Great Plains, where hills of brown grass resemble the waves on an ocean, an unusual visionary by the name of Theodore Roosevelt designated thousands of acres of beautiful tall-grass prairie land so that anyone who found himself drawn to a perfectly unique landscape such as this one could see the splendor of unspoiled prairie, prairie as it must have looked for thousands of years before the European plow turned the vast American grasslands into breadbaskets.

Situated due north of the Black Hills of South Dakota and almost directly to the east of Yellowstone National Park, the Theodore Roosevelt National Park is located in northwestern North Dakota. It is part of a much larger tract of federally designated land known as the Little Missouri National Grassland. Known colloquially as the Upper Badlands for its similarities to the park in South Dakota, it is a visually stunning piece of landscape sitting directly in the middle of what seems, to the unaccustomed traveler, like a million miles of grass and barbed wire.

To me, an East Coast native who had driven two thousand miles to escape the confusion of constant traffic and people, the park was an entirely different world. I had been two weeks in getting there, living out of my truck and trying to find a way to make a life out of travel. I was not expecting much, a place to pitch my tent and dry some clothes while on my way to Montana, so my decision to backpack alone was made spontaneously, which is one of the reasons it turned out to be an amazing experience. I spent two days, not a very long time by most standards, yet the experience I had was so surprising that I could not have packed its intensity into two weeks of backpacking.

Because backpacking usually requires a great deal of planning and organization, the spontaneity of my decision was a factor in the uniqueness of my experience. With little consideration for organization, I gathered the little bit of food I had—coffee, some oatmeal, peanut butter, and bagels—threw in a change of clothes, and some rain gear, and walked away from picnic tables and parking lots in the late afternoon of a beautiful September day.

After fording the Little Missouri River and wading through the bushes that clog its banks, I left the yellowing cottonwoods and sandy river-bottom soil and began to climb. As I hiked up a series of switchbacks, the landscape changed into scrubby oak trees, waist-high prairie grass, and small rock outcroppings. After three hours, the darkening and threatening sky forced me to make camp on a knoll that was at least fifteen hundred feet above the river I had forded earlier.

After pitching my tent, I set out to take in my surroundings while I had enough daylight to see. Across the muddy river, which resembled a giant, mythical serpent, was a thousand-foot rock face colored in bands of pastel pinks, reds, and oranges. Above me a sunset exploded. The thunderheads, which had rolled in seemingly from nowhere, sectioned out the great mass of yellow and orange, their presence heightening the violent color bursts of the disappearing sun. It felt as if God was dabbling on a giant, cosmic canvas, and I was the only one lucky enough to witness it.

As I settled into the course, scratchy grass, coyotes were sounding off to one another, calling mournful warnings, or greetings, or perhaps just reassuring themselves that they were not alone. I had no such reassurance; I had left alone and had encountered no others. In front of my

tent a herd of mule deer casually plodded along, raising their heads from the grass only to look at me with mild curiosity. I could smell rain in the wind that was picking up from the approaching storm, and the aroma of juniper and sagebrush floated around me.

The sun's explosion played itself out, and the sky began to resemble an inverted black bowl pricked with ten million pinholes of light. I was overcome with the beauty all around me. The fact that every day ends as spectacularly as this day had ended was an almost overwhelming revelation to me.

Though I was all alone that evening, I was not lonely, and though I had not eaten all day, I felt fully nourished. That evening I came to the realization that beauty, even the extraordinary beauty that I had just witnessed, is everywhere and happening all the time. There often is effort in noticing, but the result is always greater than the effort expended.

Ironically, a short, unplanned trip wound up having a more profound effect on me than any other. The trips into the wilderness I have taken since that night in North Dakota have been colored with my newfound sensibility, and therefore have been spectacular, but because it was on that particular evening that I gained insight, nothing I have done has compared equally.

Drawing by Cheryl Andrews

Shades

James Hutcherson

What color shall I choose today?
These eyes they need a change.
So tired of seeing colored shades,
Just want them all the same.

I'm sure a surgeon handles this,
My Blue Cross card he spies.
Please take these vague irregularities,
and give me two more eyes.

Not these they're too rose colored,
Not those don't need the blues.
Don't need no pastel pinks and greens,
And those, way too obtuse.

Don't tell me there're no clear-cut views.
Politicians say it's so.
So if Bob and Newt do get to see,
I sure want mine also.

Drawing by Sandra Brugh Moore

The Dog

Cheryl Andrews

That damn dog. I hate that dog. Yap, yap, yap. Just brainless, mindless barking. Not even real barking, but a shrill, penetrating *yap*. Like short, sharp nails being driven directly into my skull. It has a pattern, repeated over and over, like Morse code. Yap, yap, yap . . . yap, yap . . . yap, yap, yap. Isn't that S.O.S.? If it doesn't shut up, it's going to *need* S.O.S. It's 2:44 in the morning, and the neighborhood is dead quiet except for that damn dog. There can't possibly be anything out there to bark *at*. And why does it have to get under *my* bedroom window to yap? All night, every night. Ever since they moved in a week ago. Why can't they hear it? I'm going crazy from sleep deprivation and endless torture, and they're undoubtedly sleeping like babies. Then again, I have seen neither hide nor hair of them since that first day. It's like they just moved in psychodog and a little furniture and left town.

The first time I saw the dog, I almost laughed. It has to be just about the ugliest dog in the world. Only about a foot high, and a sickly cream color, like curdled milk. It's almost bald, with little sprigs of hair sticking out at random, like some insane barber had got hold of it. You think it might have been kind of cute at one time? Like Benji cute? Naw, not a chance, that dog has *always* been ugly. Makes you wonder what those people were thinking to take something like that into their home. It had to have been a gift from a hateful mother-in-law with a sick sense of humor. That must be why they put it out at night; they hate it too. They can't give it away—no one would voluntarily take that beast—but since there is no fence, maybe it would conveniently wander away. "Aw, sorry Mom. Honestly, I don't know what happened, he just disappeared."

Yeah.

You'd think it would get hoarse, or at least bored, with that monotonous, mechanical, repetitive yapping, like a wind-up toy from hell. If it was a real bark, I think I could stand it better. I was raised around dogs—real dogs who could do what dogs were meant to do, like hunting, herding or stopping a burglar—and they only barked when it was necessary. If one of them barked, you knew there was a good reason. And it was the kind of bark that would *scare* a burglar—not just irritate him.

Yap, yap, yap. It doesn't even take a breath. How can it keep that up? There is nothing normal about a dog like that. It must be psychotic. Probably got a look at itself in a mirror one day. Drove it right over the edge.

3:10. I have to get up in three hours to go to work, and I haven't slept yet. I have to do *something*. The first few nights I tried screaming at it to shut up. It even worked for a while. Screaming seemed to startle it. Like no one had ever told it to "shut up" before. Not likely, but maybe they didn't say it with as much *enthusiasm* as I did. It didn't entirely stop the yapping, but it did slow it down enough so that I could get in a nap before it started up again. Now, no amount of yelling has any effect.

I've always been taught not to nag at a dog. One quick, firm correction is more effective than constant nagging. If you say "no," make sure the dog knows you mean "no!" Ookaay. It's about time this dog understands what "shut up!" means. I'm going out there and teach that dog one quick, firm lesson and be done with it. If it sees me coming, I know it'll run off for a while, but that's not enough—the damn thing will just come right back. But maybe if I'm careful, I can go out the back door and slip around from behind and scare the yap right out of it.

Where are my shoes? I need to turn on a light, but I don't want to give it any warning. If I can sneak up on it and scream right into its ratty little ear, I might be able to scare it off long enough for me to get some sleep. I'm wasting time fumbling around in the dark—forget the shoes, never mind the robe; it's time to get this over with.

Man, it's dark out here. Around the corner . . . remember the rose bush—give that plenty of room. I can't see the dog but I can hear it just fine. It's still yapping. Good. It's totally unaware that I'm out here. *Damn!* That hurts! I stubbed my toe on the only rock in the whole yard. Not a big rock, just big enough nearly to break my toe. Hmm. Just big enough. Nice and round, about the size of my fist, about two pounds. Perfect! Even better than my original plan. If I can throw this rock close enough, I should be able to scare that yappy little monster into the next neighborhood. I'll have to throw it hard. I don't want just to spook this dumb dog a little bit and give it something to *really* bark at.

Concentrate . . . . Aim for the yap . . . . Wind her up, and let her go! SHUT UP! Yapyap*thunk!* Yike! All right! Perfect shot! That had to have hit the ground within an inch of its ugly little nose. That dog won't stop running 'til it gets to Nebraska! I'll bet next time I yell SHUT UP, that dog's legs will start running before its ears finish hearing!

Silence. Ahh yes. I can hear my bed a-calling.

Luxurious! Wonderful! This bed has never felt so comfortable. Five minutes without a sound. I never thought pure silence could feel so peaceful. And I never realized what a good pitcher I could be (given the proper inspiration). I should try out for the majors. That pitch was as close to perfect as anyone could get. And the sound of that *thunk!* and that simultaneous *Yike!* was so satisfying.

That rock probably even skinned its little nose. Oh no. Surely I didn't actually *hit* the dog. I'm not *that* good a shot. I *couldn't* have gotten that close. But that was a pretty big rock. And I did throw it about as hard as I could . . . .

Geez! I probably killed it. I've never hurt anything in my life. Now I'll go to hell for sure, and that ratty little dog will be there to torture me through eternity.

4:00. It's so quiet. Not a sound. *Dead silence.*

Now I won't sleep for worrying about that damn dog. God, I hate that dog!

Survival

Nancy Dillingham

Like the spring
choosing its own time to reappear
I struggle to rise.

(False starts are nothing new to me.)

Climbing out from under the wintery weight
of a white March morning
I search for reasons.

After seasons of false springs and lies—
and more than one snowy surprise—
I contemplate the trees
folding out their tender hearts

and I, at last, get my start.

Drawing by Sandra Brugh Moore

Luminescence of Life

Gabrielle Thompson

The flashlight cast a pale path along the old logging road we followed. Leaves crunched under our boots. Unbidden, snakes entered my thoughts. As a city girl/island woman, now mountain transplant, I was not totally comfortable with the forest on such a dark night. No, I decided, snakes would not be here to mar our journey. It was mid-May, and a cool fifty degrees. These were part of the ideal conditions for our quest. We had specific directions: during the two middle weeks of May, on a clear, still, windless night, with a temperature of fifty to fifty-five degrees, before the moon rise and between 9:00-11:00 pm, we were to walk into deep, wet woods to acquaint ourselves with a touch of mountain magic. These were the requirements for connecting with the fairies of Appalachia.

The previous July, when we moved from the Virgin Islands to Western North Carolina, I had met Clyde Hollifield at a dinner party. When he spoke of fairies, I thought he was spinning one of his many tales. He had been a puppet master and storyteller for many years and had performed for President Carter at the White House. Now he was a welding instructor at McDowell Technical Community College in Marion, North Carolina. He was also working on a comprehensive storybook about fairies, detailing their lives in drawings and text. With smiling eyes, Clyde told us we could see them ourselves if we followed the aforementioned conditions. Then he said the words that caught me hook, line, and sinker. He said fairies were luminous, and they danced together through the trees in glowing ribbons of light. Having spent a great deal of my life on the sea, I knew the *magic* of things *that glow in the dark*.

As a child in suburban Los Angeles, I was nature-starved. However, in Los Angeles I discovered the beauty of phosphorescence on an ink-black night. It is one of life's most magical experiences. I was twelve when I had my first encounter with luminosity. My father took me to Malibu to see the red tide light up the California coastline. As waves curled gently, a blue fire burst within the foam, rendering the top of the wave translucent. A few fish, corpulent from bloating, dotted the sand. Even their stench could not diminish the joy I felt in seeing this eerie, blue-green glow. Father told me how the microorganisms normally lived without ill-effect in the ocean. However, under certain conditions, they procreated in massive numbers, turning the sea red and toxic with their increased volume. At night when there was no moon to diminish their incandescence, they were agitated by the action of the waves rising to meet the shore, creating a phosphorescent release of energy.

Three years later, we witnessed a red tide combined with a major Pacific storm. We drove to the "Pipeline," an area where waves formed a wall of water with a wave curl that surfers could ride through, or "shoot." On this night, a thirty-foot-high, brilliant neon-green fire-tube raced through the black night to thunder on the shore, shooting Roman candles of blue-green star dust ten feet into the air as its force collided with the sand's edge. People were romping on the damp sand, racing forward as the waves retreated, kicking sand high into the air, and sending light showering from the falling sand. It resembled a pagan ritual, a Beltane fire: everyone was in a frenzy of joy and laughter as they twirled and played in such magnificence. I looked closely at the wet sand as the water retreated. A million stars twinkled where the organisms burned in their night of splendor. Overhead, the stars mirrored the image. As the sea stole the sand from beneath my feet, my balance shifted. For one moment I felt swept into the fire of creation. A

seagull, cawing, flew into my vision. It glowed nebulously where ocean spray had painted its feathers. Frances Hodgson Burnett's explanation of magic in *The Secret Garden* reverberated in my mind: *Everything is made out of Magic, leaves and trees, flowers and birds, badgers and foxes and squirrels and people. So it must be all around us. In this garden—in all the places* . . . . For me, this night was filled with magic.

More magic awaited. I met my husband, Edward, while I was in college. He was a Navy lieutenant with a dream to build a seventy-five-foot schooner. We did so and sailed to the Virgin Islands. On our voyage to the islands, we encountered luminescent life even in the deepest ocean. Two hundred miles off the coast of Mexico, we were surrounded by "glow worms," spirals of light that would blink on, twirl, and fade like shiny silver dollars on the calm black sea. Later, we were told it was a mating ritual for a worm-like organism and only occurred once a year.

In the Virgin Islands, we found a cove in the mangroves of Hurricane Hole, St. John, that glowed with phosphorescence much of the year. Here, in briny, fecund waters that were always still, our dinghy's propeller would stir up a light show for our charter guests. Fish shot through the shallows like tracer bullets, their paths blazing for minutes after their passage. After seeing this display, one of our guests dove over the side of the schooner. Her butterfly stroke created a metamorphosis from human to angel.

I told Clyde of these experiences. He told me about lightning bugs, striking crystals, fox fire, the Brown Mountain Lights, and the fairies. My seven-year-old daughter and I had already trapped fireflies to study in her bug barn. Their blinking, airborne radiance was a new experience for us both. We watched their internal burning with awe before releasing them back to the night. Clyde showed us how we could re-create that flash of blue-green emission by striking two large, clear quartz crystals together. The spark burst forth in the darkness, releasing green light inches in front of the crystals.

The Brown Mountain Lights, Clyde explained, were occasionally seen on summer nights from Wiseman's Peak near the Linville Wilderness area. The lights remain stationary for hours at a time--and disappear in the blink of an eye. Alien spacecraft, reflections from distant cities, car or train headlights, and even a ghost carrying a lantern have all been suggested as possible explanations. Clyde's supposition is some sort of electromagnetic occurrence. He said the lights were elusive and difficult to experience, but the fairies appeared every year in mid-May.

Later that first summer, we were lucky enough to find fox fire. Ed had mowed over a stump, causing the rotting wood to effloresce. We were dumbfounded by the amount of illumination it produced and gathered chunks to shine by our bedside that night.

However, we had to wait until spring for our fairy trek. Rain hampered the first few nights of the new moon. When I arrived home from my job at the library the next night, I called Ed to join me with a flashlight.

We caught ourselves whispering as we went deeper into the woods. Suddenly, in the canopy of darkness to my right, I glimpsed movement. I signaled Ed to shut off the light. Ahead, in pitch black, we saw a tiny glow through the trees. It was continuous, but it was too far in the undergrowth for us to attempt to reach it. We turned on the light and moved quickly to where the creek flows along the old road—deep into the wet woods.

Two creeks converge and flow under the road. As we shut off the flashlight, rivers of green neon followed along the banks . . . minuscule pinpoints joining together into flowing cascades of unblinking luminosity. Each stream of light flowed two feet above the ground, moving *upstream*. My heartbeat quickened as I watched the cable of green rise and fall with the

curvature of the land. I reached toward the light. It gently moved away, keeping the same clearance from my hand as it did from the ground. Ed turned on the light; no explanation could be seen. We continued to try to "catch" the luminescence. But, like a specter, it veered into nothingness.

We spent over an hour on our fairy hunt. Finally, we were able to trap one of the small beings. It was much smaller than a grain of rice. Under its wings, its body was luminiferous. It did not blink like a firefly, but glowed with constant splendor. Knowing it was an insect did not lessen its magic for us. I count my blessings that, in all the places I have lived, nature has provided a show to brighten the darkness. And this summer, I may have to try to see those Brown Mountain Lights.

Drawing by Sandra Brugh Moore

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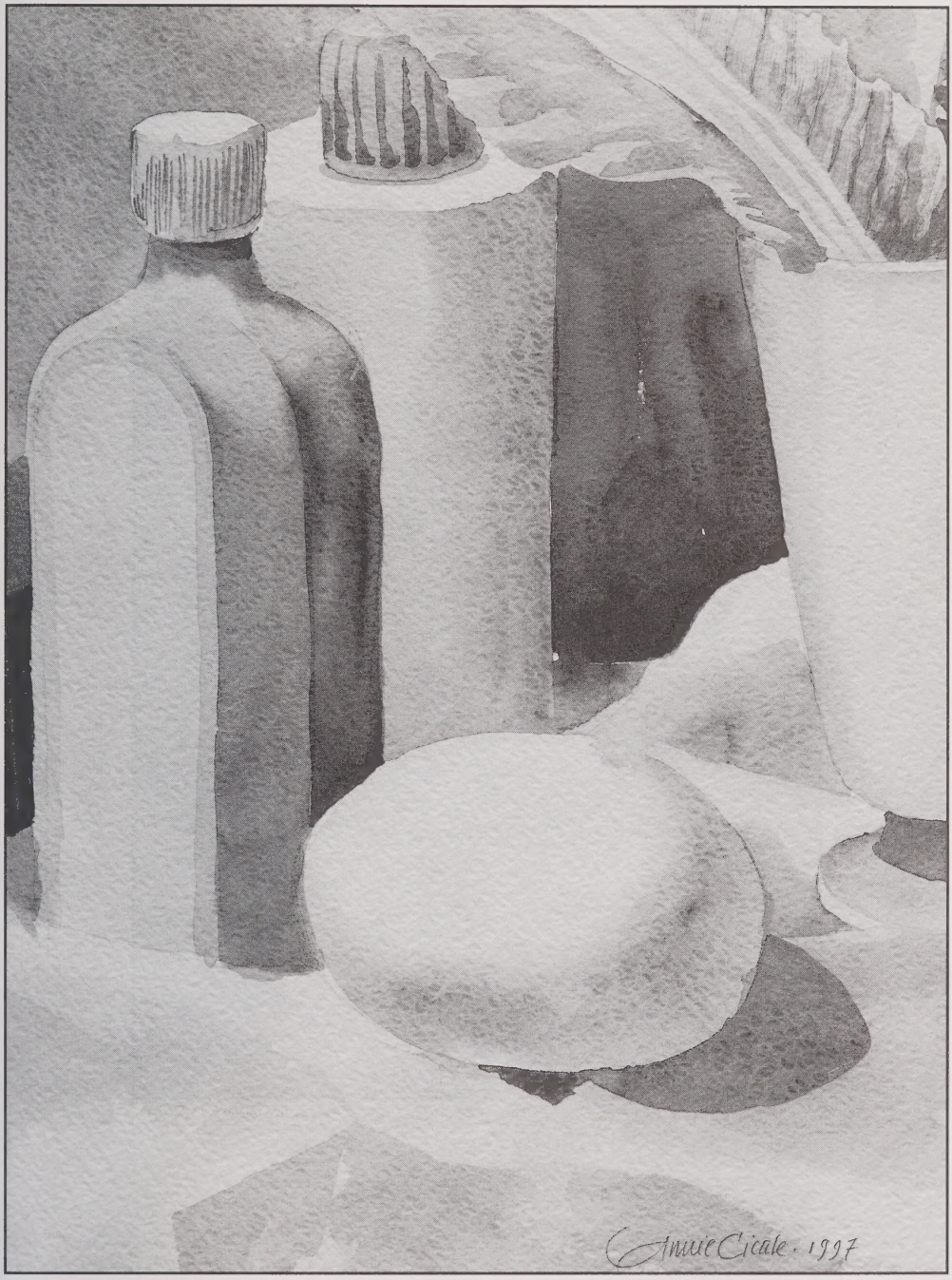
Victoria Press **continues to include contributions from neighboring community colleges and from established writers with local ties. We thank each contributor, especially Wilma Dykeman.**



Watercolor by Annie Cicale

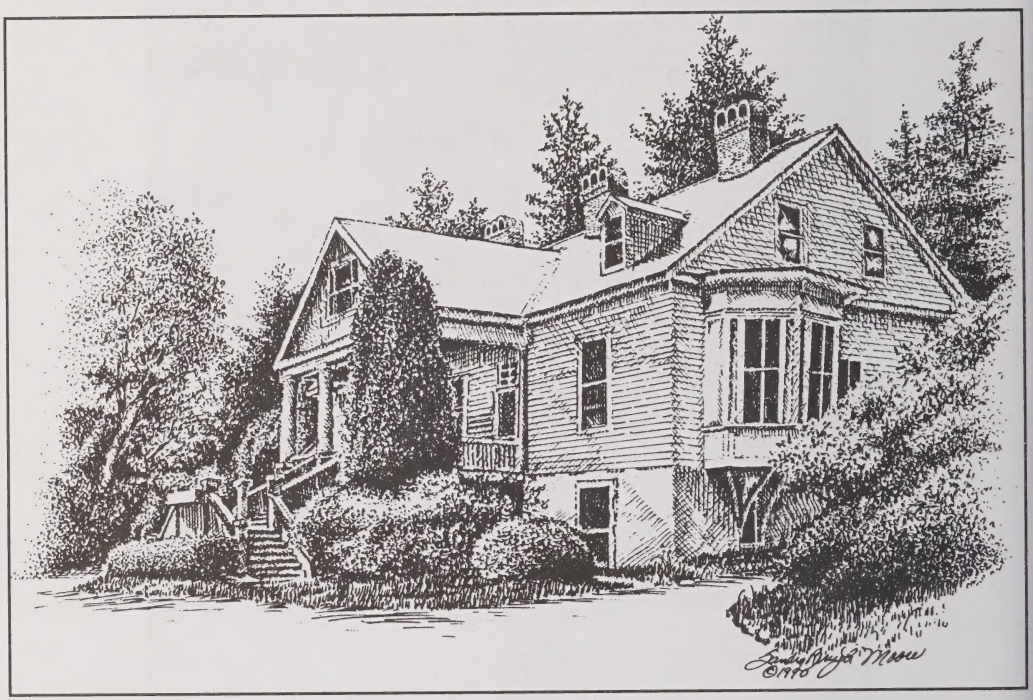
Photo by Peggy Higgins

This issue of *Victoria Press* is dedicated to the memory of

Arleen Bryan

Life is a pure flame, and we live by an invisible sun within us.

Sir Thomas Browne



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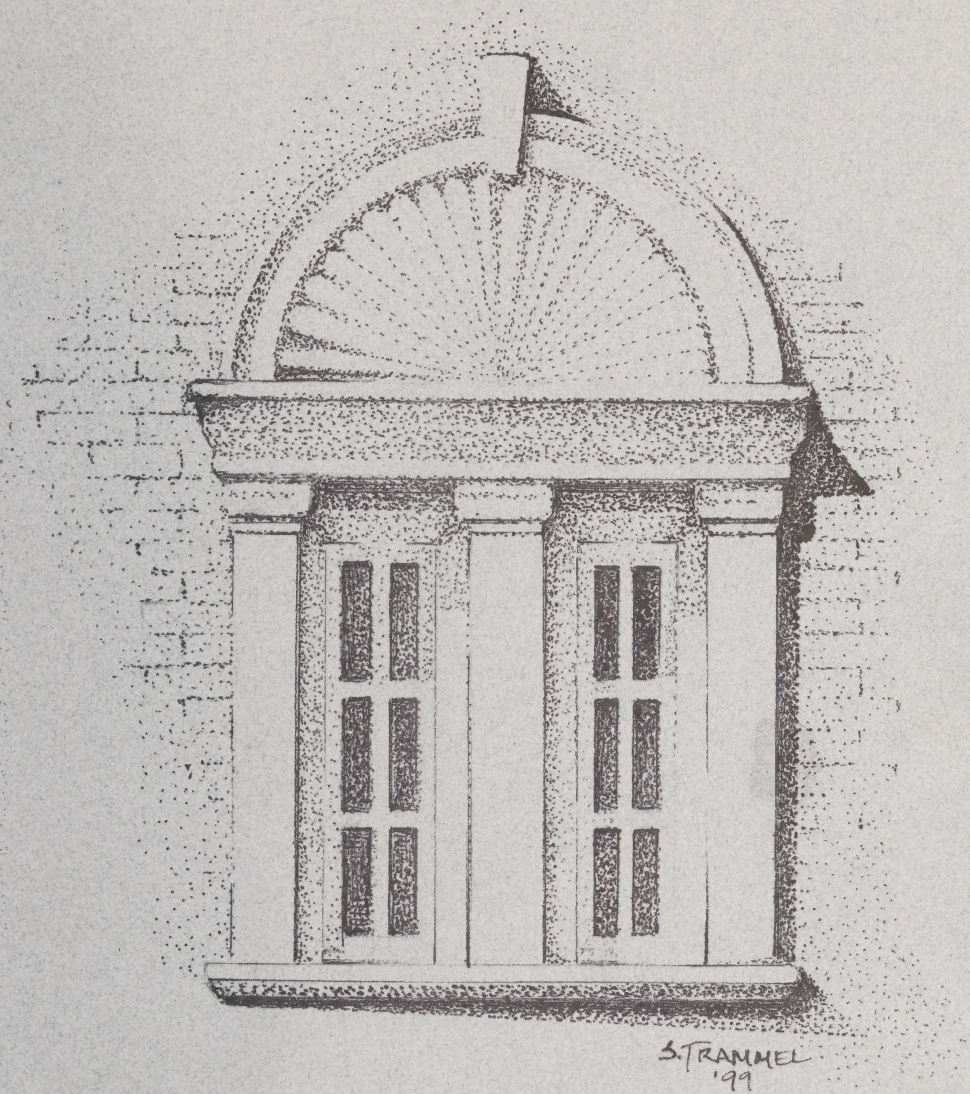

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Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College

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Elgin and His Amazing Plastic Snakes from *Waking Up in a Cornfield*

Chris Cox

It is Thanksgiving, and I am standing out in Elgin's yard admiring his plastic snakes. Elgin is my uncle, and we almost always have Thanksgiving at his and Aunt Lillie's place in the strange, beautiful community of Vox, a "suburb" of my hometown, Sparta, NC. Their three-bedroom ranch home is one in a cluster of homes in an area inhabited mainly by relatives from my dad's side of the family. Sometimes we have Thanksgiving at my grandmother's house, which is less than a quarter mile up the gravel road from Lillie and Elgin's, but most of the time we gather at Elgin's, because he always has something to show those of us not lucky enough to be able to attend the family's regular Sunday gatherings.

Last time I was up, he had just bought a new van that he and the family intend to drive out West this summer, and the time before that he had built a flowerbed in the shape of a giant heart in the center of his circular driveway.

Lately, though, he's been on a reptile kick. Suddenly, his house is surrounded by plastic snakes, frogs, and lizards, all situated in gratifyingly matter-of-fact nature scenes. For example, near the large living room window, a three-foot green and brown snake is coiled lovingly around a piece of driftwood roughly the length of a fence rail, while, just around the corner, a pair of rubber lizards sun themselves on a tree stump salvaged from a wood-cutting expedition. Beside the garage, where a flowerbed of marigolds once thrived, a trio of frogs, probably ceramic, sit in a semicircle around a makeshift pond, as if poised to jump in if startled. Elgin is in the process of looking for some plastic tadpoles to help add some ambience to his pond.

Elgin is one of the best men I have even known. He is my idea of the perfect Christian, humble rather than smug, one who models his beliefs rather than proclaiming them from the rooftops. He'll never hold his life up to yours in order to bring your mountainous sins into the proper relief. He doesn't practice what he preaches; he practices *rather* than preaches.

When I was nine or ten years old, I was terrified of going to church because, every third Sunday, the preachers would go into explicit detail on the elaborate horrors awaiting those of us not yet saved, how even the very young would be held accountable for their sinful natures, how you never knew when your time was coming, and how young flesh burned just the same as old. Frequently, I left the church feeling completely nauseated and deathly afraid, my head dizzied by the scent of seared flesh and the tortured screams of the terminally damned. One day, after a particularly jarring sermon during which the preacher got so enthralled in his vision of hell that his voice began to lilt rhythmically while his body swayed to and fro like the pendulum of some eternal clock, Elgin approached me as I leaned against the gate of the graveyard behind the church, looking out over the rows of tombstones, pondering my mortality. Why couldn't I go up at the altar call? Why couldn't I just give my life to Jesus and put an end to the agonizing pressure?

Elgin knew what was wrong.

"You don't need to worry about getting saved until you're ready," he said. "It's not for anybody else but you to know when that time is, and when it comes you'll know. Don't you worry about nothing." Then he pulled me away from the graveyard, back

toward the land of the living. I rode home with him after church, studying him in close detail, as if to memorize all of his features—from his sharp flattop to the architecture of ash at the end of his cigarette—so when I went to bed that night, those would be the images I would remember, and not the hellish images which had been drawn so vividly earlier. Maybe Jesus would save me later, but I needed Elgin to save me then, and he did.

Around that same time, Elgin taught me my first lesson about the hard things you sometimes have to do as an adult. Animals are and always have been an integral part of Vox community. There have been generations of dogs and cats running about through the years, harassing the chickens when they take a notion, letting them enjoy a moment's peace when they don't. Mostly, these are community pets, a little fatter than the average since they get fed at several houses instead of just one, and their diet usually consists of leftover chicken'n'dumplings and such, rather than Purina Hi-Pro.

When I was a kid, one of the neighborhood dogs was a large, beautiful dog we called Red, ingeniously named for his long, shimmering red hair. He was a smart, gentle dog who could do more tricks than any dog we'd ever had in the neighborhood, and the entire family loved him. Unfortunately, he had the habit of chasing cars, and nothing anyone tried could break him from it.

One hot summer day, it finally happened. Red got hit by a car, which crushed his hind quarters and broke both of his back legs. We heard the yelp from the back yard and came running, only to find him in the middle of the road, whimpering and helpless, unable to move. My cousins, brother, sister, and I were hysterical, but Elgin would not let us get too close to Red because he said Red was hurt and might bite us, even if he didn't mean it. Of course, we were screaming for Red to be taken to a doctor, and someone even suggested calling for an ambulance, but Elgin saw what had to be done immediately. He told us to go to the back yard and he'd take care of it. We did as we were told, but in a few minutes I couldn't help but peek, and what I saw was Elgin pointing a rifle at Red. I think I cried out just as the shot filled the hot sky like a thunderclap, and when our ears stopped ringing, Red was no longer whimpering.

I was so stunned, I could not speak, or even cry. I thought Elgin would save Red somehow, and instead he had killed him. It was like discovering that Santa Claus whipped the elves. I ran over to Elgin, ready to unleash all of my grief and confusion on him. How could he so nonchalantly pull Red out of the road like that after having shot him? Then I realized that, in his own quiet way, Elgin was as distraught over Red's death as any of us, probably more so.

"Had to be done," he said to me. "Couldn't let him lay there suffering. He wouldn't ever have been able to walk again. You wouldn't want that, would you? He sure wouldn't have."

As usual, Elgin was right. Red would have been miserable crippled. It took me a long time to absorb that Elgin had done the only thing he could do, the only merciful thing that could be done. I could not have done it. I hadn't been thinking about Red so much as I had been thinking about myself. I loved playing with Red, and I didn't want him to be hurt. Elgin, of course, didn't want it either, but it had happened, and he had done what had to be done, and now he had to try to explain the occasional meanness of chance to a bunch of grief-stricken kids too inexperienced to comprehend anything much outside the boundaries of childhood innocence.

And now, all these years later, chance brings me here again, to Elgin's ersatz swamp. I love the snakes, love the lizards. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Lord.

Photo by Lee Schleining

"Birthplace of Del Reeves" from *Waking Up in a Cornfield*

Chris Cox

I was on vacation during the past week in my hometown of Sparta, NC, birthplace of the country music semi-superstar Del Reeves, who sang the semi-smash hit "Girl on the Billboard" and was something of a Nashville luminary some 20-25 years back. At the city limits, there is a sign that reads, "Welcome to Sparta, Home of Del Reeves." My grandmother lives next door to Del's brother, Homer. Every so often, Homer's coon dogs get loose and roam around the neighborhood, pausing every few yards to mark the next tree or bush with that special signature for which dogs are famous.

I never knew Del, who was already gone to Nashville before I was born, but I've known Homer all my life. I spent a lot of time during my childhood at my grandmother's house, and I became good friends with Homer's grandson, Greg, who was about two years younger than I. We played whiffle ball in the yard, using a bush, a small tree, and the corner of a flowerbed as bases. If you hit it to the creek, it was an automatic home run. He pretended he was Reggie Jackson or Johnny Bench, and I was Don Sutton or Phil Niekro. We played for hours, then spent the balance of those long summer days tormenting our younger siblings with practical jokes, outrageous lies, and interminable teasing. Greg's sister Laurinda was a six-year-old hellion who could hold her own even in the face of our most fiendish plots against her. She was a tremendously skilled "fake crier," able to sob hysterically on cue and bring their mother Laurene to the porch with her hands planted on her hips. Sometimes, if she was inspired sufficiently, Laurinda would allege that Greg had hit her, when in fact he might have done nothing more injurious than chase her around the yard brandishing a baby black snake in a Mason jar, or maybe just a simple dried dog turd.

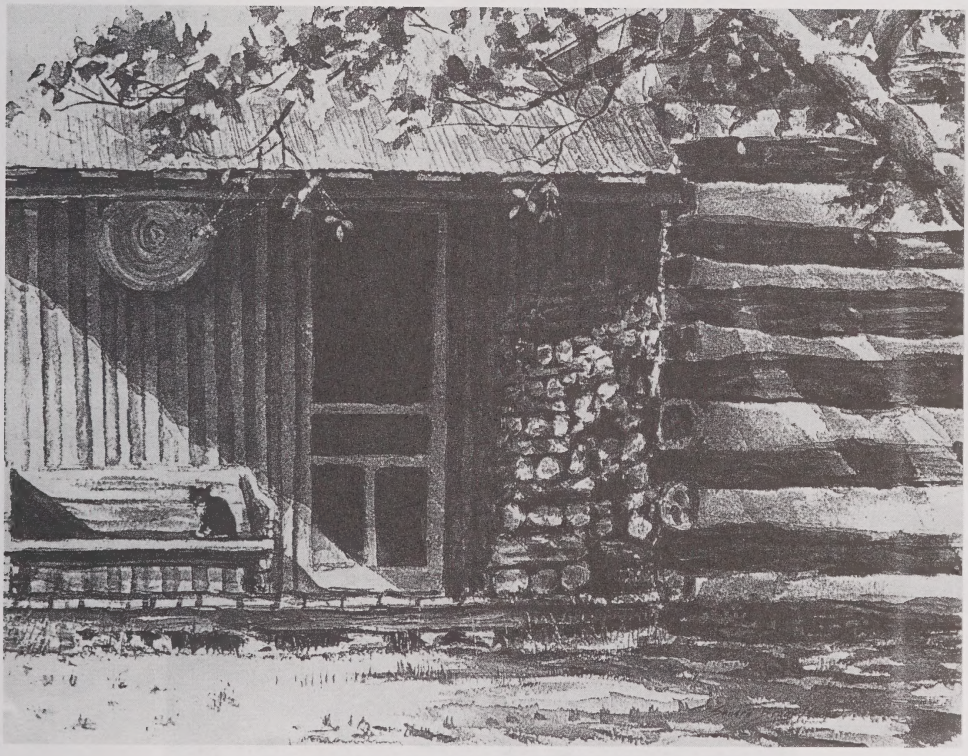
It didn't matter. The verdict was always the same. Laurene instructed Greg to go and cut a hickory switch to be whipped with. If the switch was not satisfactory, Laurene herself would go and cut it, and the whipping would be twice as bad. From my detached vantage point, this form of punishment struck me as particularly sadistic, and therefore marvelous. Here was a descendant of Del Reeves about to get his bare legs striped with red welts by a hickory switch of his own choosing, and I would get to see the entire thing. My own mother, bless her, lacked the temperament for such medieval corrective actions, preferring the "wait-til-your-dad-gets-home" method of discipline.

Not Laurene. She was the very epitome of hands-on. Her arm and that switch were just a blur, like a hummingbird's wings, and she pivoted around in circles, holding Greg with one arm while blistering his legs with the other. It was like something pure, and Greg shrieked so loudly with cries of repentance that Homer would be roused from his afternoon nap and come to stand in the shade of his enormous maple tree and watch the proceedings with a grim face.

A few years later, when I finally was old enough to drive, I'd sometimes find myself trapped behind Homer on the winding road that led to town. There was no place to pass, and Homer has always been famous for never exceeding 25 miles per hour in his ancient white Ford pickup. On the bumper, there was a decal which read, fittingly, "I May Be Slow, But I'm Ahead of You." In the pickup bed, the coon dogs, who always liked to ride into town, danced around like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Now, all these years later, Greg has his own business in Winston-Salem, Laurinda is happily married with kids of her own, Del still sings the same songs that made him famous, and Homer still has his coon dogs. Saturday night, as I was visiting my grandmother, I happened to look out the window just in time to see the brown one marking his territory on my left front tire.

The next morning, my last day in Sparta for a few more months, I got behind Homer on my way to town. The coon dogs' heads bobbed like apples in a barrel at the Halloween carnival. Fifteen miles per hour. He may be slow, but he's still ahead of me.



Watercolor by Sandra Brugh Moore

The Ambiguity of Morning

Nancy Dillingham

With one arm
on the bedpost
about to rise
you hold me
in an awkward embrace

Through the curtains
dawn sweeps
the gray corners
of the room
clearing away the night

The ambiguity of morning
disappears
and through my tears
I see the fears—
and the light

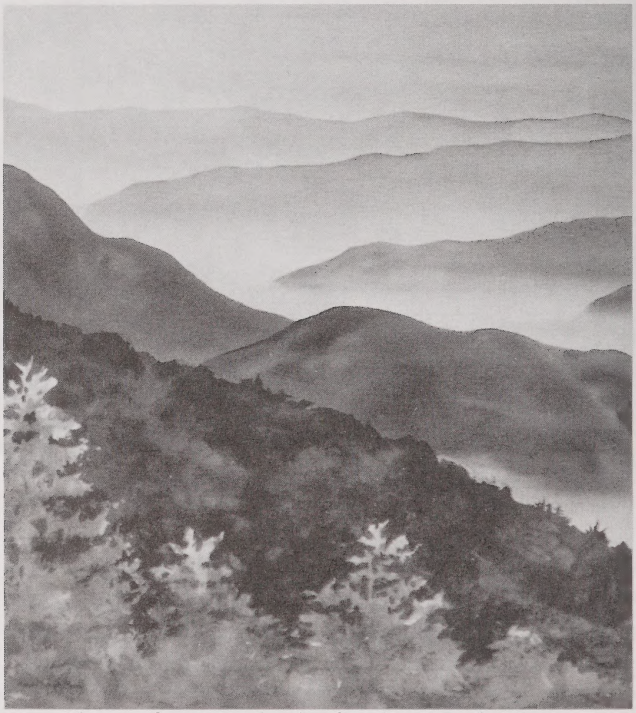


Photo of watercolor by Sandra Brugh Moore

Photo by George Knox

Babel

Julia Nunnally Duncan

The first thing she remembered when she woke was her dog. She looked at the crook of her arm and saw that the dog wasn't with her. So where was he now?

But soon she realized she wasn't at home. This bed, narrow and stiff, was not her soft feather bed. She liked the patchwork quilt of her own bed. This stale wool blanket scratched her legs.

Now she remembered. Like always she had walked the edge of the highway last evening, holding her dog Babel and carrying in her burlap sack the dumpster's discarded loaf of bread and container of pimento cheese—good enough supper for her and Babel. And she rummaged out some scraps of clothes. She never needed to spend money on dresses, the way women in Milton threw good ones away.

The evening had been chilly—downright cold for November—and that and the fact that Babel's whimpering had kept her awake lately made her stop and crawl inside the car at Perry's Junkyard. She hadn't meant to stay there long, just for a short nap, for Babel didn't like for them to be away from home. But the moment she shut her eyes, the stars flickered and whirled in her head, and then she was asleep.

It was a trick her mama had taught her thirty years ago.

Shut your eyes, her mama would say, tucking the quilt under her chin and leaning over her in the dark bedroom. *Picture the Big Dipper,* her mama said and kissed her closed eyelids; *imagine yourself sitting on top of a star. Let it ride you through the sky, till you're so high you can't ever come down again. Up there no meanness can touch you.* And she had risen above the house and into the night, letting the stars carry her through the heavens. On those nights, she never recalled her mama walking back out of the bedroom.

Last evening, the stars had again carried her away, and Babel's voice had not wakened her. And then suddenly—it must have been at dawn—she woke in this place, and she thought she felt Babel in the crook of her arm, but now she realized he was gone.

A stuffed animal was pressed against her arm, and it might have been Babel's small curled body if she let her imagination fool her, but Babel's heat and steady breathing were as familiar to her as her own. No, this was not Babel.

As she lay studying the stuffed dog, someone stepped inside the room. The man, a stranger of her own middle age, whose blond hair touched his shoulders, leaned over her. He grasped her arm and turned it in his hand.

"You shouldn't have fought me," he said and touched a sore spot above her elbow. She looked and saw the bruise.

"Is this your bed?" she asked and stared at him. His denim shirt was half-buttoned and when she asked this, he let go of her arm.

"I'm sleeping on the floor till you get better," he said, turning his eyes away from her.

"You brought me here?" she asked and he nodded.

"Well then, you must have my dog Babel, too," she said and sat up. Now she saw that the small room was sparsely furnished. In the corner stood a straight chair, against the wall a Formica table with a portable T.V. on top. Above the T.V. was a wall calendar with a picture of Jesus holding a lamb. "Why'd you bring me here?" she said.

"A woman sleeping in a car in the junkyard will end up in Broughton Hospital," he said. "You don't want to go there."

"Well, I don't intend to, so give me my dog Babel and I'll go home."

"You're not thinking about what a mental hospital is like," he said, "or you wouldn't let people catch you sleeping in a junkyard."

She threw back the blanket, and the stuffed dog dropped to the floor. She noticed her bare legs, her cotton dress bunched around her thighs. She reached to pull down the dress.

"I've seen you," she said and thought for a minute. "Now I know where." It was at the town pool hall, where she'd seen him leaning over a pool table, teenaged girls standing near him smoking pot. One dusk when she walked by she looked in and noticed him. The girls there were young and easy—she had been one of them in another time, when the room reeked of bootlegged beer.

"I ain't one of your pool hall girls," she said, keeping her past to herself.

"I brought you here to keep you from trouble," he said. "The county can put you away if you're too noticeable. Best to keep away from town, stay out of the dumpsters. You could sign up for welfare, get food stamps. You don't need to sleep in cars."

That was just one night, she thought. But he wouldn't listen, she could tell.

"I prefer my own bed," she said and looked for her shoes. There beside the bed, next to his sleeping bag, was the pair of scuffed saddle oxfords she'd found at the dump last week.

So he slept beside me after all, she thought. It'd been a long time since a man had been even that close. For the past several years it'd been just her and Babel.

She picked up the stuffed dog. "You can't keep Babel hid for long," she said and turned the dog in her hands. Its tan fur was so worn that the coarse threads of the burlap material showed through, and one ear was frayed as if a mouse had chewed it. "This your toy?" she asked, seeing no humor in the question, though the man faintly smiled.

"No," he said and wiped his mouth with his hand, brushing the smile away.

"No," he said again. "It's not mine. I just found it and thought it needed protecting."

"So you been in the dumpsters, too?" she said, grinning herself. A grown man keeping a toy like that—it was kind of funny—and she had thought he could be a lover.

She studied for a minute. "You been in Broughton, haven't you?" she said and looked at him. Now she could see the shadows under his eyes, the weariness in his blue stare.

"A man don't need to dwell on that," he said. "But it's best to recall it every once in a while so you won't end up there again."

"You figure on going back?" she said, and realized it wasn't a polite thing to say.

"I don't plan on being noticed," he said. He sat quiet for a while and then said, "I didn't mean to bruise you. Wasn't no need in that, but you fought me."

"I don't remember," she said. So much in her life she didn't remember as if wads of time had been yanked from her memory. I may not even remember this, she thought, and the idea troubled her.

Picture the Big Dipper was all she needed to think, and then it was like her mind went numb. Her mama had taught her that secret, but maybe it was a curse. After her mama had been pulled from the well and her daddy cried, swearing he had nothing to do with the accident, she had lain in strange beds and let the stars carry her away. Maybe her mama had foreseen that someday she would need the trick of the stars to help her escape the world and its meanness. It seemed that for years after the accident—until men at the pool hall could make her lose herself in another way—her mind depended on the stars. Even now in this man's room, the Big Dipper tugged at her.

But she wouldn't let it take her. If for no other reason, Babel needed her.

"You can't keep my dog hid for long," she told the man. "He'll start whimpering and keep on till I find him and hold him. I never seen a dog that needed so much holding. He probably kept you awake last night. You can't hide him from me for long."

"I knew a dog like that once—" the man said. He seemed to want to say more, but stopped himself.

"What kind of dog was it?" she said, wondering where he might have put Babel. Maybe Babel was tied up outside. Babel wouldn't like that no more than she would. She'd fought like a bobcat when people had tried to bind her. There were places in the county that did that to a person—tied you to a chair to keep you still; strapped you in your bed till you couldn't turn at night.

The man sat with his hands on his knees. His blue jeans looked so ragged she could swear he pulled his clothes from a dumpster too.

"Was it a little dog like Babel?" she asked—"the one you knew once?" Her dog Babel was a beagle, she reckoned. His head was square like a calf's but his amber eyes were as intelligent as a man's. More so, in her opinion. For years his eyes were the only ones she'd seen any sense in.

The man stepped over and took the stuffed dog from her.

"It looked like this dog," he said. He tugged the dog's frayed ear and held the worn face close to his own. For a minute he looked at the plastic eyes and then handed it back to her. She took it as if it were hers. Someway it felt like hers now.

"It was my daddy's rabbit dog," he said. "But when Daddy went away, my sister claimed it. Then they took her away. It didn't live long after that, though. It was a good dog."

"Like Babel, I expect," she said and wished she could remember more about last night. It wasn't like Babel to keep quiet this long without her. Surely the man had put Babel in a safe place. There was a kindness in his voice that the dog would like. It wasn't often that either of them heard kind voices, but this man's words were soft and stirred something in her, a shadow of a memory.

"I don't guess Babel fought you when you brought us here," she said.

"No," he said and looked at her. "Not a bit."

"Why do you stare at me like that?" she said and leaned back against the pillow. She wanted to get up and leave this place, but she wasn't ready to get up just yet; her limbs were growing numb and her mind hazy again.

"I'm just sorry I hurt you," he said and his eyes were so sad she knew he wasn't lying. She had known her daddy wasn't lying then too, though she'd heard whispering to the contrary.

"Maybe I will rest here for a day or two," she said, "if Babel and I won't bother you—" Before she finished the words, her mind was dark and a light flickered and she couldn't hold herself to the earth. *Goodnight, Mama,* she thought as her mama reached to tuck in the blanket.

The man had walked to the bed and covered her with the blanket, careful not to disturb the stuffed dog in the crook of her arm. He leaned to kiss her closed eyes. He remembered his own childhood bed and his mama's lips on his eyelids.

"We'll take care of her, Babel," he said to the stuffed dog, and watched his sister sleep.

Drawing by Constance M. Smutz

Exotica

Nancy Dillingham

The midwife hovers
over the hothouse room
crooning an incantation

Incandescent, glowing with pain
the mother-to-be crowns
then blossoms then blooms

Full-flower, lying in supreme calm
she cradles the baby's nakedness
to her own

the whole world an interloper
surprising, reprising
a sacred rite

a mother in prayer

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Faulkner's Mistress
Excerpted from *The Caretaker's Daughter*, a novel in progress

Bill Brooks

Around town Billy was known as "Count
No Count" because men from there didn't

take much to writers and poets and other
types who didn't work with their hands

or at the ass end of a mule or something they
generally considered hard labor whether or not

it was labor at all

spitting and sitting around and talking all the
time they weren't out in the fields sharecropping

the sun beating down on their necks, their backs
sore as hell so that when they grew old they just

naturally grew stooped over with backs as crooked
as a banker's heart—black faces, white faces, children

and women all the same there under that broiling
sun in that broiling place he called Yoknapatawpha.

but come the evening, he'd sometimes stop by and
visit and reach his hands for me, mouth as greedy as

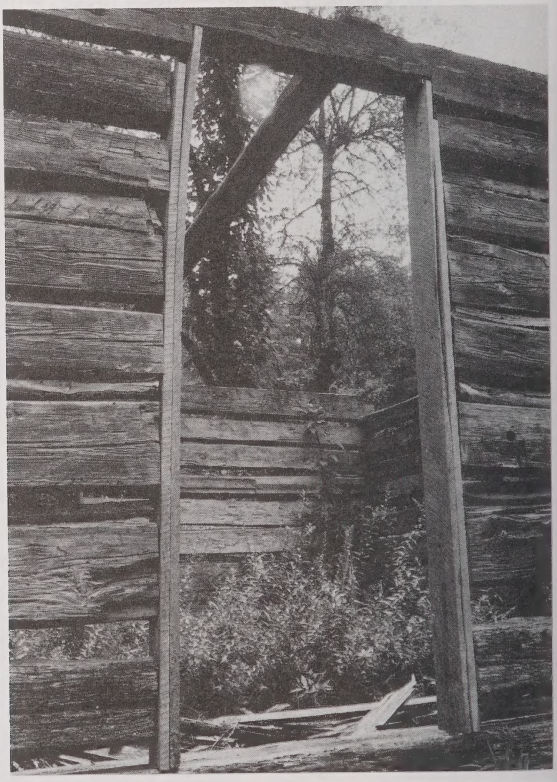
any man I've ever known. Nothing subtle about him,
no poetry in his need of me. Just fine hot blood ripping

through his veins, "burning up his heart," he'd say as
we lay upon the bed, his eyes soft and terrible from the

things he knew and couldn't say to me or anyone including
Estelle. "You know I'm just a man like any other man,"

he'd say, and I'd say that I knew it and would take
him inside me and hold him like I would any other man.

Billy loved me, I think, like he loved us all, and I loved
him for what that was worth to such a man who had so many words.



Photos by Shirley McLaughlin

That Nameless Death
Excerpted from *The Caretaker's Daughter*, a novel in progress

Bill Brooks

The first time I saw death was in an Appalachian farmhouse when I
Was five or six years old. An infant lay in a small casket that rested on
Sawhorses in the family room. There was a piano there as well, and a
Big radio and people sitting in chairs and a woman crying. The infant
Looked like a doll someone had dressed in a white gown tatted with
Lace—its face bloodless as a doll's. I climbed out through a window
And went up into the woods and tried to make sense of it. I found a creek
And sat by it until I heard my father call me to come, that we were leaving,
And I returned and got into the back seat of his black Chevrolet
Sedan and we drove away and back down the winding roads to a town
Where we stopped and ate hamburgers and drank Cokes and I never
Learned why the baby was dead or why we had to go see it.

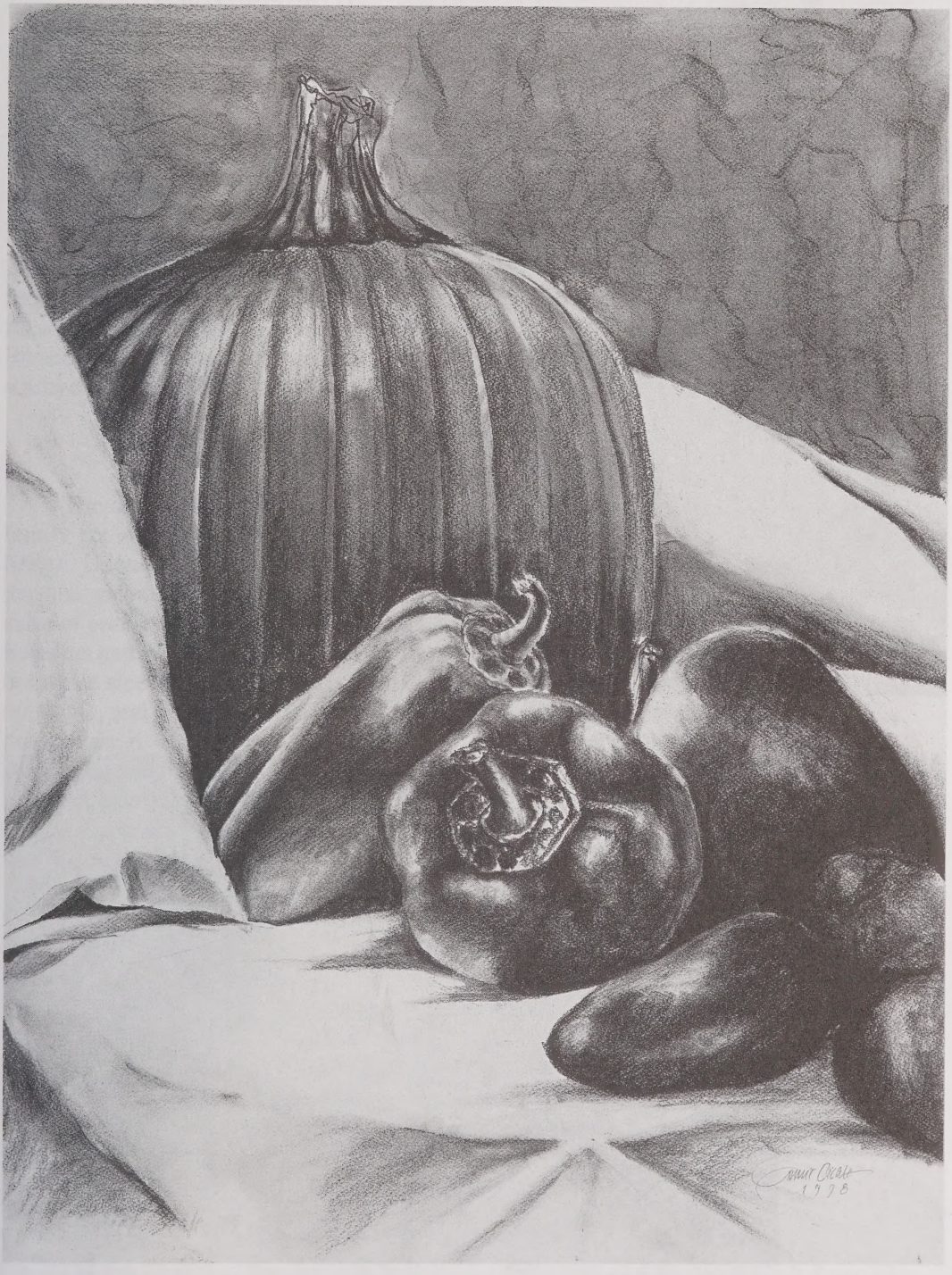
Photo by Celia Miles

Ode to a Dancer in the Café de l'Opera
Excerpted from *The Caretaker's Daughter*, a novel in progress

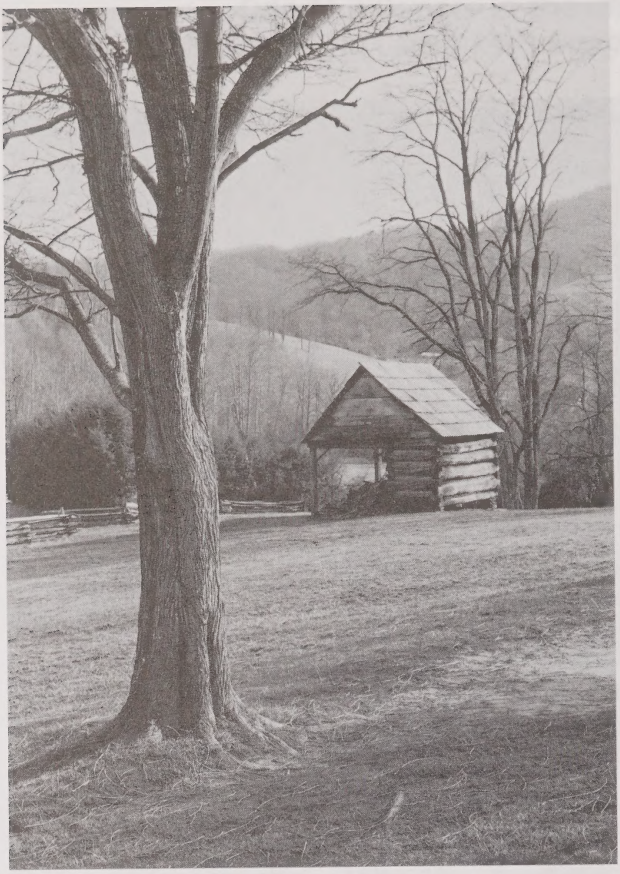
Bill Brooks

"The pain falls mainly on the insane in Spain."
My fingers touch nothing as my heart beats
Parched blood blinding my eyes to everything
But your glance as I watch you dance away
Under callous light, blinking on and off like
A caution signal that warns men not to love
You too much, or too little. Blinking as if to
Warn: Desire. Passion. Regret. Desire.
Passion. Regret. Desire. Passion. Regret.

Drawing by Constance M. Smutz



Drawing by Annie Cicale



Photos by Shirley McLaughlin

The Preacher

from Raleigh *News and Observer* Sunday Reader featuring original works of short fiction by North Carolina writers

Nancy Dillingham

I

Into the house of pain the Preacher comes. It is too hot, his suit too tight, binding him. He moves through a wall of mourners to Cathryn and the small coffin, pushing his wife and small son gently ahead of him. He nods to Cathryn's family, acknowledging them. Then he takes out his Bible and conducts what appears to the mourners from afar a blessing in pantomime. They see Cathryn and her family look up expectantly at the Preacher and his small entourage and watch them all bow their heads as the Preacher says a prayer. Then the Preacher exits as he has entered, his wife and son following behind.

II

The next events also happen as a slow-motion pantomime. The Preacher and his family get into their small, black car, drive down the lane and start over the small, wooden bridge. Uneasy and swollen from recent floods, the bridge tosses its burden, coffin-like, into the waters. The Preacher's son, sitting in the back seat, a hand expectantly holding the sides of each of his parents' seats, is tossed out of one of the open windows, appearing boneless and shapeless as a bundle of clothes. As the car floats through the air, the wife in her white sleeveless summer dress drifts in a slow pirouette out her door, which opens as by magic, and disappears into the water like a sleight of hand being performed. The car lands in the river on its side and begins to fill with water. The Preacher paws the air as if swimming and mouths their names soundlessly as he struggles from the car, his door jammed, having taken the full impact of the toss, before he, too, washes free of the accident and appears to reach out an arm and catch quite effortlessly the small bundle of his son. Then, like an apparition in a white suit, he also disappears into the water.

III

At about the same time, in a field wild with sweet clover, a young boy tempts the devil in his own pantomime. In an enactment of a slow-motion rodeo, he glides soundlessly through the wide expanse of the field and lands his looped rope like a lasso around the thick neck of the startled bull he has come to fetch. Down the hot highway he drifts towards home, victorious and heroic. Then, impulsively, he knots the rope in his hands around his belt. A sudden sound, someone's yell perhaps, spooks the bull, and in a flash, the hero is undone, down, dragged to a too-early death.

IV

The apple tree spreads its great arms and lets go its blossoms. They drift down like snow and settle under its canopy where a small drama is taking place. Cathryn sits in her

childhood swing, holding onto its ropes with her slender, white arms. Tommy holds her from behind, his hands on her in a motion ready to lift her and then push her forward. She inclines her head backwards toward his and, his hand still over hers, he reaches with two of his fingers and teases a strand of her hair, loose and streaming in the wind. She touches her soft, flushed cheek against his. He is hungry and tastes her lips that are pink like the inside of the apple blossoms' buds and her throat which is white and fragrant as the blossoms in full bloom.

Much later, after Tommy has pushed her so high that her toes punch little holes in the sky and they are winded and laughing together and they have said good-by, Cathryn still sits in the swing, lost in reverie when the Preacher walks up behind her, noiseless on the white sea of blossoms, dizzy with desire. . .

V

Her eyes closed, Cathryn takes in the redolence of a warm summer day. The screened-in back porch and the silence and the light are her sanctuary as she sits in the oblong tin tub bathing, all pink, breathing light and feathery sounds, opening up in the warmth of the afternoon sun. . .

As she rises out of the water, she hears a soft footfall and turns slowly at the sound of the wooden screen door opening.

He sees her stand up, all white and pink and glistening with water, looking at him in sleepy surprise. One purposeful stride and he stands in front of her. In what seems like one seamless motion, he sucks in his breath, lifts her out of the water; and she lifts her arms, drapes them around his neck, and lets out a long sigh; they move and breathe as one.

VI

Hearts as heavy as the now-closed lids of the four wooden caskets—one much smaller than the other three—and the one that all eyes keep straying to—lift as the Preacher strides forward, and the whole congregation of mourners rises in one spontaneous gesture, as if to lift him or hold him up as he begins.

In the part of their hearts that they reserve for breaking, the old ladies in the front row with their fans and their white gloves and their pinned, veiled hats contrast the figure in black before them to the vision that drifted up the aisle, resplendent in white, golden red hair shining, brilliant blue eyes flashing, the Sunday he preached his first sermon in the church.

The Preacher begins by reading a passage from Matthew Arnold's poem "The Buried Life":

"But often, in the din of strife
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course;
A longing to inquire
Into the mystery of this heart which beats
So wild, so deep in us—to know
Whence our lives come and where they go."

The Preacher's words wash over the mourners with the same power they have held from the beginning, somehow cleansing and assuaging their sorrow.

VII

The ground is white not with snow but with apple blossoms soft and warm, not cold like her heart. The air smells sweet, not acrid like the taste in her mouth. As they lower the small box into the shallow grave, she thinks the rich, newly turned earth could be furrows in which to plant seed to flourish and grow and flower. But it is her baby she is burying, and she thinks she cannot savor the sweetness nor feel the warmth ever again.

VIII

Six months later, the Preacher stands alone on desolate ground, a cold wind blowing the gray headstones free of snow that has obscured the names carved on them. He touches his wife's stone and traces his life with her as he traces her name. Then he rests his hands on the stone of his son as he has many times on his narrow shoulders, gently guiding him along. He walks to a family plot where young Tommy is buried and places a piece of dried clover from the fields on his headstone. He moves finally, and perhaps most painfully, to a corner of the graveyard where Cathryn's infant Grace rests. He bows down, encircling the small stone in his arms.

The wind is silent, still as the Preacher rises and walks off the hill towards home.

Drawing by Constance M. Smutz

First Deeds

Bill Moore

Three corn seeds
Deep in the womb wet earth
Blood blest, nature blasted, opening their
Universe to the clay. Mother nurturing
Father giving, life claiming, forest singing
Tree priested mountains. Who can know the Holy
Trinity of the leaves and the sunlight, darklight
Mysteries of the blade of grass?

Birth and Death
Sky filling, life giving, crying
The seminal tears, flowing down the
Dark belly of the universe and giving it
Light.

Seed upon seed,
Life upon life
Deed upon deed.
In the darkest pit, the light
still shines.

Drawing by Annie Cicale

Dentist

Celia H. Miles

"I'd rather be a knot on a hickory tree than to have to go to the dentist," Aunt Mattie said. She adjusted her black hat and made a face at her image in the mirror. Her left jaw was so swollen that she couldn't really pull much of a frown, and when she let her guard down I could see the pain in her eyes.

"Can't I go with you?" I'd never been inside a dentist's office. I wanted to see—and hear—for myself.

"No. I told you Addie and her brother's coming by to get me. She's getting a permanent wave while I'm at the dentist's."

I thought I'd like to see a permanent wave being given plus see the teeth-puller's torture room. Aunt Mattie thought I shouldn't waste my time.

"You've got schoolwork to do, young lady. And the other chores you've been laying off to get done."

It was true I had been so busy reading *Lorna Doone* lately that I had neglected a few things around the house. Aunt Mattie didn't expect me to do a whole lot, but I'd promised to split kindling and to re-stack the woodpile that had fallen down two weeks before.

"I'll have supper ready," I promised. If Aunt Mattie could have smiled without hurting, she would have. I saw the little gleam in her eyes. Cooking was not something that came naturally to me.

"Just some soup beans, June. I won't be able to chew anything anyway."

It was dark when Addie Schuler and her brother brought Aunt Mattie home. Luckily I had fixed a big pot of beans and the cornbread was in the warming oven. When all three came in the front door, I knew we'd have company for supper.

Brad Schuler put his hat on the peg and settled himself in front of the fireplace. The women looked exhausted. They came in the kitchen.

"Run get some kraut, June, and I'll fry us some potatoes. The Schulers are eating with us."

"Are you all right?" The swelling seemed to have gone down some in Aunt Mattie's jaw, but her lips were drawn to the left. I had some trouble understanding her instructions.

"Yes. Minus not one but two teeth." She was already picking potatoes out of the bin and fumbling for a paring knife.

"Sit down, Aunt Mattie," I said. "You look done in. I'll get the potatoes started in just a minute. Everything else is ready."

It surprised me that my aunt did leave off what she was doing and join Addie at the kitchen table. As I hurried out to the spring house, I saw in the semi-darkness Addie's hair.

"What in the world—" I dashed out before I finished, knowing what I was about to say was uncomplimentary. Addie's gray hair was frizzled up in little tight kinks that made her head look like nothing I'd ever seen.

In record time, we were seated at the table and I'd poured buttermilk for all of us. I was proud of my first "cooking for company" supper, even if it was just ordinary fare, no chicken or ham. Brad Schuler set right in to eating. He looked up only once to say "Good potatoes, June. You'll make some man a good cook one of these days."

After that one comment, like he'd uncorked a bottle, both women started talking.

"Lord, Mattie, don't talk to me about the tooth-puller!" Addie crumbled bread into her beans. "If you want your head fried and your brains just about jolted out of your head—go to Thelma's. If I'd a-knowed what I was in for—"

"Well, I'd risk that any day, compared to that dentist chair." Aunt Mattie's voice even quivered just a little. I couldn't believe it. I'd seen her deal with burns and cuts and stone bruises and bad headaches without more than a word or two of complaint.

"What happened?" I asked.

Both women answered at the same time.

"He set me down in this cold-as-cream chair, I was surrounded by these little instruments, picks and tweezers, and before I knew—"

"Thelma's got this contraption with wires coming down in all directions—" Addie chimed in.

"'This ain't going to hurt much, Miz Geer' is what he said. 'But I've got to look in there. Open up.'"

"And Thelma took these chemicals out of this bottle and that bottle, smelling to high heaven—"

"I'd put my glasses on this little tray beside the chair, so I couldn't see right clearly, but I saw that needle in his hand. 'Lord, Doc,' I said, 'is that meant for me?' I could see that needle sharp enough and that dentist's teeth. Now he's got the prettiest teeth I've ever seen on a man. True pearly whites. I thought I'd tell him I just wanted a pill or two—"

"Thelma's got a washing chair, and she had my neck bent backwards and my head in that wash basin before I could say more'n that I wanted a permanent wave, fine as she give Miz Duffey last month. Long as I can remember this was the first time anybody's fingers have been scrubbing my head besides mine. The shampoo just foamed up. She's got a way with washing hair, I'll tell you. My head won't recover 'til a month of Sundays."

"'Bad luck, Miz Geer, there are two molars that will have to come out. Truth be told, I ought to delay on one of them, a little abscess there. You do want them out, don't you? This will sting a little.' How was I supposed to answer, me with my head in these little padded cushions and a big white cloth clipped to me. He kept on talking, mumbling this and that and waving that needle around. I had both eyes wide open, but I couldn't say a thing. Now, that needle part was the scariest part, when it scrunched right on into my gums, I thought I'd die—"

"And the minute Thelma pushed me back straight up after a-rinsing and a-rinsing, she started in with them wires, just a-twisting this way and that. Then she started attaching me to that machine, clamping me tight as a drum. Lordy, all I could think about was that electric chair in Raleigh—"

"Funny thing, after I thought I'd die, I kind of lost track of what was going on. Then all of a sudden, I thought my face was going to come apart from my head! I could hear this scrunching and wrenching and pulling and tearing, and I had to hold on to the chair or I believe he'd have pulled us both right out of that chair and through the wall and down Main Street, it was that bad. There was this sucking sound—"

"My hair was all twisted up and Thelma was a-humming to herself, halfway talking, things like 'your hair's coarse, it'll take a wave just fine, am I hurting you' and all the time I feel like my eyeballs are being pulled back to China, they'll never be the same—"

"This sucking sound—and he said 'Ah, that's the worst one. Might as well go ahead while you're here. You feel anything?' What could I say, blood gushing out as it was and me with my head over that little sink. I was spitting like crazy and feeling this big hole in my mouth, and—"

"Well, she turned on the power and I swear I heard my head a-sizzlin. I smelled something burning too and I said—"

"You know I couldn't say a word, my lips wouldn't work right. Now that's a funny feeling. You got something to say—though I don't know if I would have said 'stop' or 'get the other one'—and not a thing happens. In a flash he was back in my mouth and I held on to the chair while he pulled and twisted. I was sweating by then. What a blessed relief when he held up the tooth and I started spitting blood again. Now I hope that's the last time I ever darken the door of that or any other dentist."

I shivered and put my hand on Aunt Mattie's arm.

"'Thelma,' I hollered, 'you're a-burning my head up!' I was getting seasick of that smell and all them potions she used before hand. If I'd been out of doors I'd have puked right there."

Addie covered her mouth with her hand; she realized she'd said a word that wasn't for the supper table.

"I mean it, Mattie. Still Thelma just come over and untwisted one of the curls and said I'd need a few more minutes."

"That smell's enough to turn a man's stomach," her brother said. "Good thing your man's working in Yancey County."

"You shut your mouth, Brad Schuler. Don't talk like that in front of June."

"Do you hurt now, Aunt Mattie?"

"I'm feeling better, just got what feels like two of them—what did you tell me about last week, June? Two big craters in my jaw. I'll be fine. But never again will I darken his door."

"And Thelma, she charged me extra for some fine spray she used. That's likely what you're talking about, brother. You don't know a fancy smell when you smell one."

Aunt Mattie must have gotten her lips under control. She smiled at me and said to her friend, "Of the two of us, Addie, it's a toss-up as to who got the worst deal. But my ordeal don't show!"

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Photo by Constance M. Smutz

Hope

Lonnie Dockery

I didn't get to kiss her goodnight last night
And see her sleep so innocently like an
angel taking a nap.

I didn't get to wake her this morning,
gently, like I always do, so as
not to startle her.

I didn't get to carry her into the bathroom—
though she's almost too heavy to lift—
And watch her flinch when I try to flip the light switch with her toes.
She'll miss that.

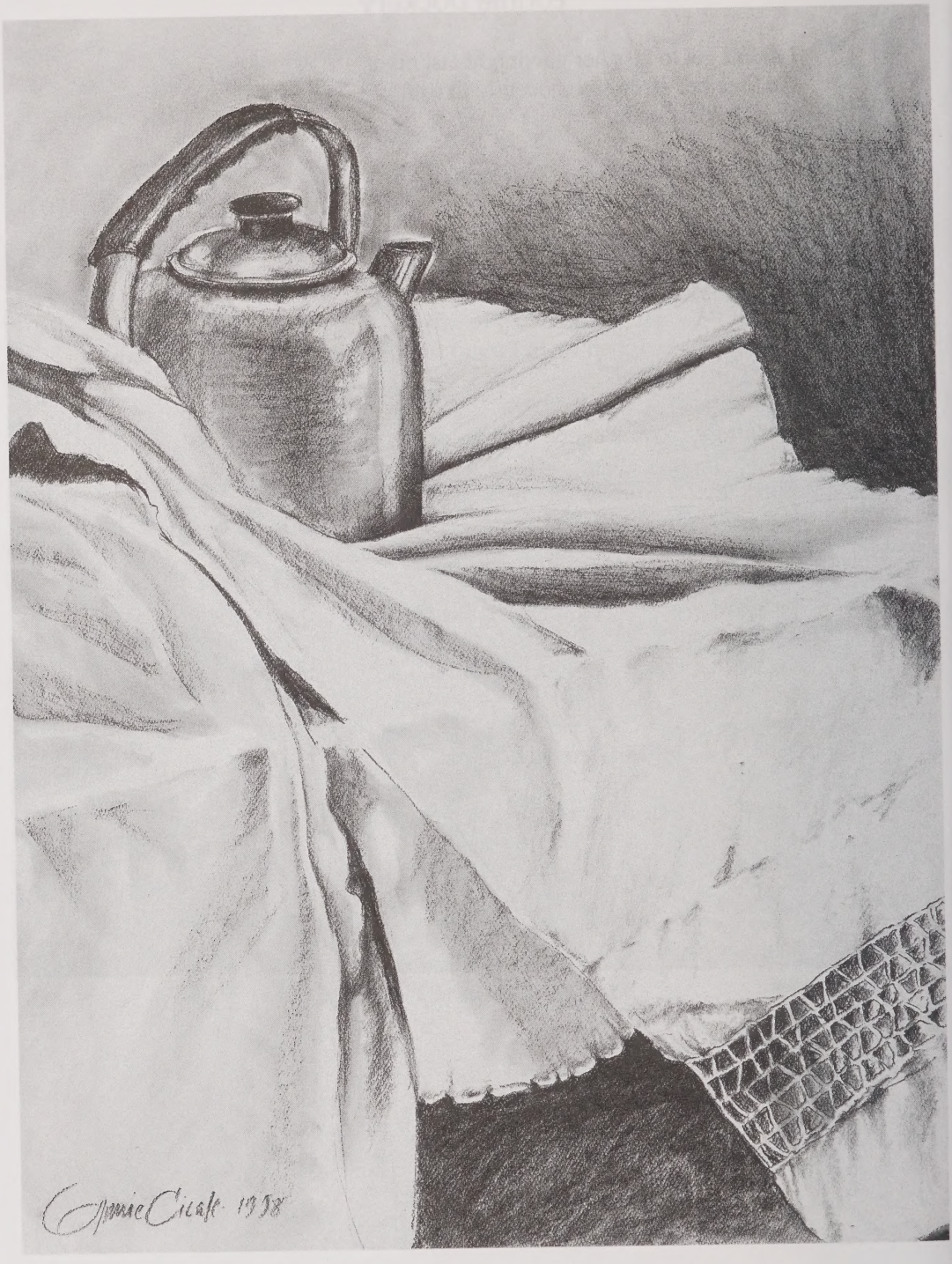
I didn't get to watch her at breakfast,
looking through sleepy, half-closed eyes at her food,
propped on one elbow, her hair everywhere.
Then suddenly wide-awake, remembering a story from yesterday
that she just has to tell me.

She's gone today. I didn't sleep last night.

Her mother doesn't love me anymore.

Tonight I have to be gone.
Tomorrow she'll sit here without me.

But there will be other mornings together.
Somewhere.



Drawing by Annie Cicale

Papa Turner's Passing

Cynthia Stewart

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

On the day of his funeral the pews of the Baptist church,
where he'd mourned the passing of friends, family,
two wives and three daughters, are filled with friends,
family, a wife and three daughters mourning his passing.

Papa, your coffin reminds me of Mama's in this same sanctuary three years ago. With hollow-hearted sorrow, I sat beside you as you cried openly. "It's a terrible thing to outlive a child," you, who outlived three, said, mourning your child nearly sixty when she died. You shook your head and looked away as if Mama's profile there in the coffin was a mistake you could not face.

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

He begat six daughters, who begat his ten grandchildren, who begat a host of great-grandchildren, one of whom begat his great-great grandson.

Papa, on your eighty-eighth birthday—the last one you would remember—you took that baby boy on your lap and, as Kodaks flashed, you blessed this boy—first-born of the fifth generation.

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

My two sons remember you as we drive to your funeral.
The oldest, a gangling nine-year-old, remembers when you gave him firecrackers at Christmas—a gift I viewed with motherly concern, he with ecstasy.
Papa, you never forgot the longings of a boyish heart.

"And him gib me chocwit," my four-year-old says, bringing to my mind all those bright, hard-freeze Carolina Christmas days in my childhood when you brought my little sister and me our own bags of chocolate drops.

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

Papa, Aunt Edith, your youngest daughter, remembered you in whispers last night as we sat beside your coffin in the funeral parlor.
"Daddy was always a practical man. Why Mr. Brown said that one morning last winter Daddy appeared unannounced at his door, said he'd come to settle up his funeral. Sat down and matter-of-factly spelled it all out—the pallbearers, the songs and the Bible he wanted placed in his hands. Said he picked out his coffin without batting an eye, and then pulled out a roll of hundred dollar bills and paid for the whole thing. Now ain't that just like him..."
Her voice drifted off as she stared back to the coffin.

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

The last song is sung, and then the undertaker moves to the front of the church, folding the shroud with prepaid reverence. With practiced gentleness, like he's tucking in a child for the night, he closes the coffin. A dull thud mars the breath-held stillness.

Papa, another phase of our lives ends as we view for the last time a face that has graced our Christmas tables, our Sunday dinners, our celebrations and sorrows.

With the look of blessed assurance of which you sang at Aunt Edith's piano after Sunday dinners, you faced eternity clasping your Bible—your oft-quoted life journey guide, your self-chosen death journey shield.

A desperate longing to hold on, to stop time, seizes us and frees tears cried as much for me as for you, Papa.

We mourn your passing, the passing of generations, the passing of time—yours and our own.

And then we're outside, following your grandsons—your appointed pallbearers—leading the line to your grave.

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

"Sunny burial day a sign of grace," mourners say, sweating in dark suits and wool dresses as they sweep across a winter-browned hillside warmed by a diamond-bright January sun that's been shamed for days by the weeping of pearl-grey skies low hung over your death bed.

"He's better off," mourners say, "trading that nursing home for heaven."

I nod agreement, Papa, recalling the last time I saw you alive—
the tubes, the labored breath, the urine stench of that nursing home hell.

I couldn't stay, hurried away from the shell of that massive oak of a man who left us that October night, felled by a single stroke.

"Yes, he's better off." All agree.

"But we're not," a granddaughter says, tears melting her voice as she walks away from the mound of mums masking the raw, red-clay wound of your grave.

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

After the funeral, family and friends return to Aunt Louise's house for a meal cooked by the ladies of the Baptist church.

A wreath of greenery and white lilies hangs on the front door where one hung for Granny nearly 30 years ago.

Papa, this house, now your daughter's, is the house you built for Granny—sweetheart girl of your youth who in hers bore you six daughters and died suddenly two weeks before she turned 60. You grieved her and then moved on, taking a late-life wife who was a cherished love for nearly two decades.

And after her death you took a third wife, an unhappy mismatch chosen in grief, a mistake you forgave yourself.

After the divorce, you moved on and married a widow, the plain-spoken Mary Ann, a friend of your youth who outlived two husbands while you outlived two wives. She graced your final years with companionship and sat with straight-backed sorrow at your funeral.

Papa, the day after your funeral, another unseasonably warm winter day, I sat with her in your front porch glider watching a squirrel scurry across stone steps you built yourself. "That's Sammy," Mary Ann said, "looking for Papa." She told me how you named and tamed the squirrels that live in the oak that shades your quarter acre of front yard. "Why he got 'em where they'd come right up to the door to get pecans he shelled for them."

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

A year before he died, he sat reminiscing about his life before a gas log fire in the living room of his cozy home located in the neighborhood surrounding the textile factory where he worked for nearly forty years. The cotton mill, as it was known, operated around the clock and was the focal point of the lint-littered neighborhood. It was the dragon in their midst that couldn't be ignored. Its clanging machinery and rhythmic looms, groaning and coughing, expelled a fine cotton dust that frosted window sills and automobiles in the tree-shaded neighborhood that sprang up around it.

Papa, that day you told me how for years you worked the second-shift at the mill after farming all morning.

"Hard work won't kill you," you said, smiling. "I'm living proof of that."

"When I was nine, I started plowing behind a mule on the Tugalo River bottoms right here in the hills of South Carolina, and I've been going ever since.

When I got grown, I saved up enough to buy a piece of land of my own, and, before I got on at the mill, I worked them fields from sunup to sundown six days a week. Then, come Sunday, I'd be walking 'em again before church to reason out what I'd do next." You shook your head, laughing at your foolishness.

You, Papa, the Depression soldier, warring on poverty, working two jobs, managed to keep that wife and six daughters. "The mill was good steady work, and them were good years—made a lot of friends there...course probably some enemies, too," you said, winking at me, and then naming some of your best friends, counting blessings like lines on your hands. Papa, you proved with mathematical certainty that counted blessings multiply.

Papa, on that day when you talked so openly about your life,
I sensed your peace and satisfaction.

It has been said that when a just man dies,
lamentations and praise, sorrow and joy are one.

Papa, we who are left behind, are sorrowful, lamenting our loss,
but we are also joyful, praising your life lived hopefully, abundantly.

It is a rich legacy you leave us, Papa.

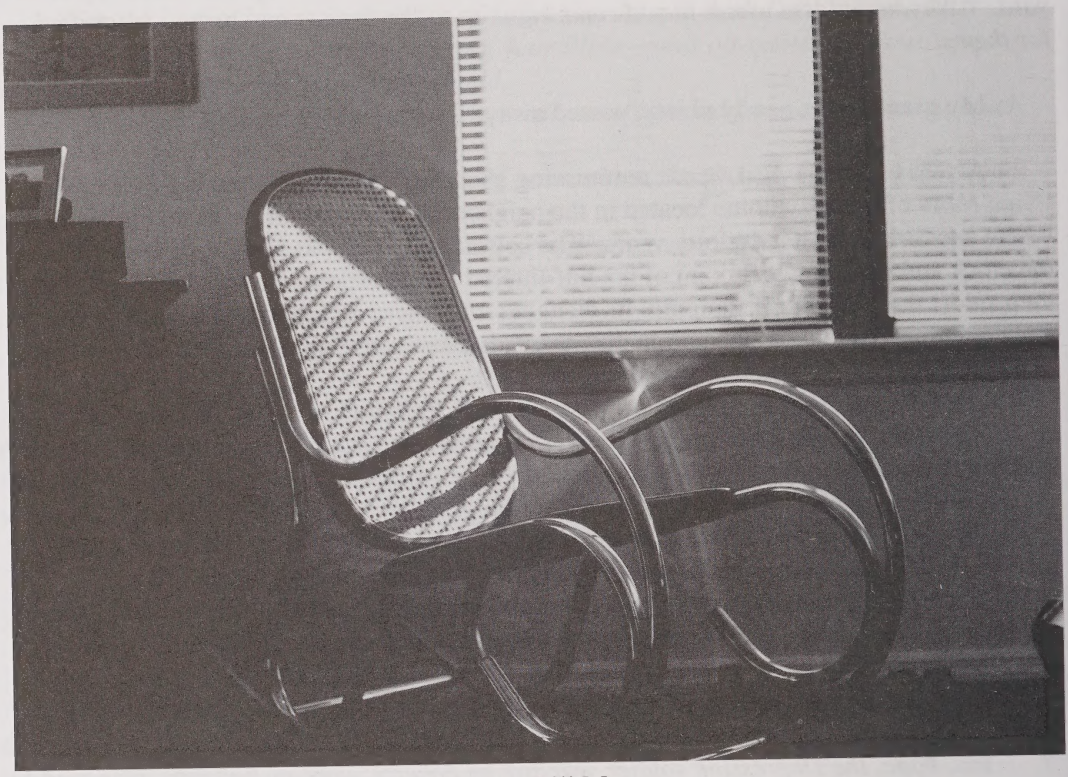


Photo by Bill Moore

Photo by Constance M. Smutz

Her Students Write in Her a Sestina

Lisa Johnson

The first hours of class, it seems to her there are only words and words,
anxious as strangers—and silence the lead-length of a dozen pencils
clutched over pages she fears are blank, beneath rows of fingers
she does not know. The thoughts moving worlds behind their eyes
write distance all around her. She doesn't ask them for poems;
it is hard enough for her to say, "Tell me your stories."

She thinks they will answer, as students often do, "We have no stories,"
and, on the first day of class, there's more to lose than nervous fingers,
nail-bitten. Between instructions, she asks the clock, "What poems
come by school light? Am I speaking...chalk? Can uncertain eyes
ever grow accustomed to each other? Who here can trust that words
offered up will not be taken as lightly as most take pencils?"

And then, a shift of tempo: the days begin to disappear like pencils
in a writer's hand, too rapidly, almost, even for a writer's eyes
to believe... How...this sudden consciousness of moving fingers,
moving measures of lives as different as the beat of stories,
and risking, like parents risk in letting children go, their poems
letting go, in some ways young as children, in others old as words?

Midterm hypothesis: she must have known them always. Their words
moving her deep and long as plates of earth, she tells them why stories
have been to her a need like the next breath, why the first pencils
she held seemed no less beguiling than the first spoken poems
must have seemed to men and women those narrow days before eyes
saw the wonder of paper, or minds the possibilities of fingers.

She watches now—and they do not seem to mind—how their fingers
move on the page as if—priest-wise—they have been called to poems
and have known from the beginning that all their beads of stories
are as vows of resonance to the same omniscience that knows pencils
should not be taken lightly—their lead, the silver gift to make words
visible and thoughts of women and men through generations of eyes.

In the last hours, their faces open like the peacock's feather eyes,
disturbance she can rest in. The sweeping whisper of their pencils
write in her a sestina. "Sixteen weeks," she says, "reading your words,
your breathing...and now in my veins, the rhythm of your fingers
moving on the tables of my classroom, these memories, these stories
older than paper, yet young as womb-life, searching like poems..."

"Your eyes stay," she says—her classroom empty now—"and your words,
legacies, like fingers reaching, many-jointed with the soul's shared stories,
light as the pith of fine pencils, heavy as the marrow of fine poems."

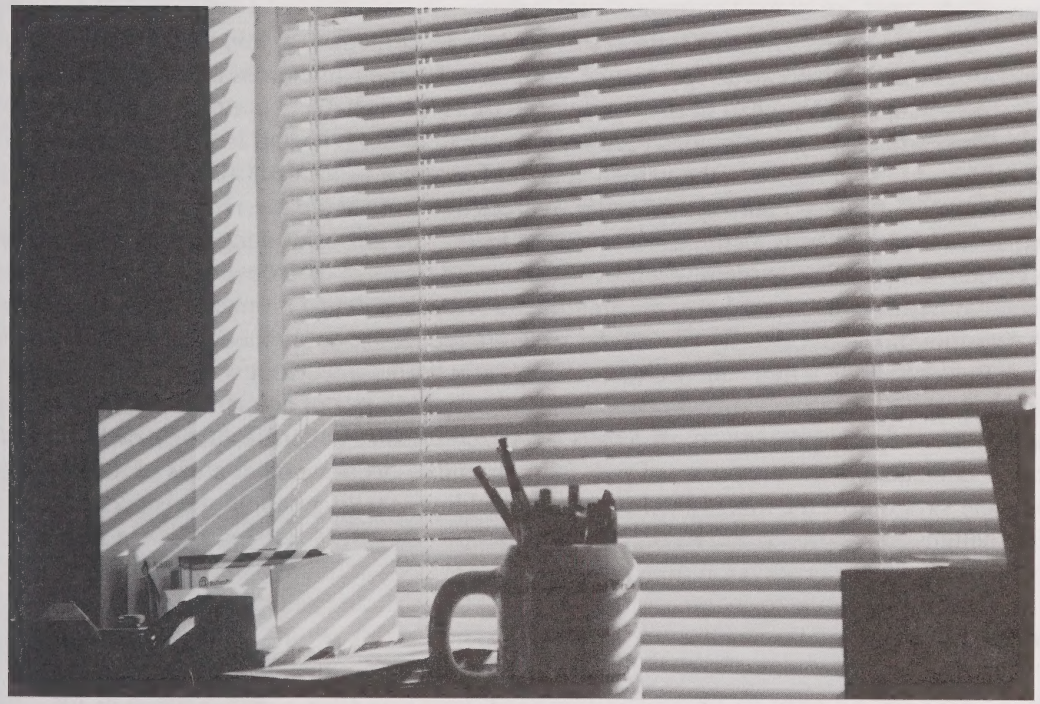


Photo by Bill Moore

Women Welders

Gabrielle M. Thompson

Nestled in the mountains of Western North Carolina, McDowell Technical Community College is on the cutting edge of creativity. A group of women has invaded the male-dominated field of welding—using plasma cutters, welders, torches and a forge to create metal art.

Gale Oliver was the first of the group to take welding in 1984. She was experimenting with the idea of welding as a career. Gale had been introduced to bulldozers, backhoes, and front-end loaders by her father, who installed in her a sense of independence and the willingness to try anything. She decided against welding as a livelihood, taking a job with the college instead. However, she continues to take the class as a creative outlet, using found objects as a basis for sculpture. She used a tractor seat to form a flower base and a can of rusted nails to mimic its pistil and stamen. A four-foot-tall, painted metal hummingbird hovers over the flower. Throughout her garden fairies, butterflies, and cats peer from perennials.

Gale convinced Maggie Gross, a soft-spoken grandmother, to join her in the welding classes. Together they create spectacular sculptures for the Amy Gross Memorial Garden. Maggie's daughter Amy had been an employee of McDowell Tech, but died at an early age. The garden, six years in construction, reflects all of her love and longing for her daughter. At the entrance to the garden, a metal Excalibur protrudes from stone, a hint of the fantasy to follow. Pathways meander by trees and towering butterfly bushes to cross expanses of flower beds teeming with brilliant hues even through a long, hot summer. It is a garden composed of gardens, each with a flavor all its own. In a cove beside the river, metallic fairies dance from branches and hide in ferns, burnished bronze in the setting sun. A five-foot monarch butterfly sips nectar from a large flower set in the midst of an extensive flower bed. In a more shaded area, a dragonfly with a three-foot wingspan rests upon an iron cattail. A twisted wrought-iron tree basket holds a riot of colorful blossoms, while across the path a large wind chime awaits a breeze. Smaller butterflies, frogs, owls, and cats—dedicated to the memories of past feline friends—decorate other areas of the garden. Maggie says one of the things she loves about welding is telling people she is taking it! She delights in their look of amazement. Her philosophy in life is "Don't let age stop you, or anything else! When you have a dream, go for it!"

Susie Painter and her husband own Painter's Greenhouse in Old Fort. She heard about the class from friends but was leery of invading the male turf. Instead, she found: "When they realized we were creating something so different than they had ever thought about, they were impressed. Especially the younger ones. They would come to us for creative advice and offer to help weld the larger pieces." She was elated to discover how easy it was to use the plasma cutter to cut out shapes. She made freehand templates, taking ideas from children's books and selling the finished product at the greenhouse. She is currently pricing welding equipment. She says: "Gardening is a big hobby. Anything you can make, people will buy. And welding isn't dangerous; you just have to be cautious. I'd recommend it for anyone as an outlet for their creativity."

Sue Benton is another MTCC employee who has taken the class, focusing on the art of silver jewelry making. She also made yard sculpture in copper, and a bat wind chime. (She is a spelunker.) She hopes to take the class again, as she wants to create a wood and metal sculpture.

Tammy Buchanan, Cary Poteat, and Tonya Band are graphic design students at the college, all of whom took the class for an elective, and for fun. They enjoy working with their hands and using what they find at the junkyard. Cary said, "I like stacking up various things to see what fits, kind of like playing with Legos." She turned an old, ornate coal stove into a Victorian footstool by cutting it down with a torch and reattaching the legs and handles to the bottom. Lamps, flower pots, and votive candles were formed from old farm equipment. Tammy made a lamp of metal leaves and garden art ranging from decorative birdhouses to a panther. Tonya's main sculpture was a six-foot dragon. Her young son laid claim to a steel cockroach meant for her garden.

I work in the library at the college. In the 1970s, I helped my husband build a seventy-five-foot gaff-rigged schooner in California. After twenty years afloat, I dug into gardening in my new, land-locked home in Western North Carolina with a great deal of pleasure. I planted extensively. I took the welding class in winter so I could work on my garden in the off-season. I used an opaque projector to enlarge a silhouette of a two-inch angel to a three-foot tall fairy. I cut her body from stainless steel and her wings from copper. Pounding the copper with hammer and chisel to resemble leaves, I was able to produce exactly what I had envisioned. Smaller fairies surround her in my flowerbeds. Next, I fabricated a pair of three-foot swans, delicately floating over waves. Our real swans willingly pose for pictures by their metal reflections. More avian metal sculpture followed, from hummingbirds to cockatoos. Cats, lizards, and frogs also romp through flower beds. Everything is made of stainless steel. People are astonished at the amount of quality sculpture I formed in one semester.

Jamie Ward, a welding instructor, has this to say about women welders: "They have such great ideas about what to do. A woman looks at things from the bottom up. What scrap is lying around, she can see how to put it together to make what she wants. A man usually has an idea of what he wants and then has to figure out how to make it work. It doesn't always work. Women are just so creative." Clyde Hollifield, the head of the department, adds: "Women make good welders because they have good hand-eye coordination and finesse. We no longer are just battleship welders. A lot is in air-conditioned labs now, doing dental bridges, electronics, space age stuff. Brains are needed for welders, not just brawn."

Photo by Bill Moore

Most Beautiful in the Bud

R.B. Goodstadt

Although I love the elegant beauty of the purple-robed Siberian...
(Perhaps even more than the extravagant colors and styles of the bearded...)
When it gets down to it, as far as irises go, for me,
Nothing surpasses the subtle beauty of the Siberian in the bud.

Its lovely hooded tip pointing skyward, its simple majesty cloaked.

And I sit distracted by the wonderful color and texture in the blue-glazed bowl in front of me:
Irises share the stage with wooly lamb's ears, soft and grey apple mint, and the antique oddness of the horsetail: wonderful sight!

Hard to think about Vietnam and the horrors of my generation,
When I can drink in such beauty.

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Drawing by Sandra Brugh Moore

Two Fountains

Ren Decatur

William Thomson Farquharson, my maternal grandfather, was musically gifted. At the age of fifteen, he had a full scholarship to the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. After some of his instructors discovered that he enjoyed playing piano mostly by ear, he lost the scholarship and could not continue his university education. He got a job on a merchant vessel and jumped ship in New York City. A part of his life was spent living and working, and singing, in Atlanta, Georgia. Not only was he gifted with a rich tenor voice of operatic quality, he was also a phenomenal pianist. We could hum a tune to him and he could play it with such extravagant melodic and harmonic frills that we had to listen closely to follow the original melody.

As a result of his musical prowess, it is not surprising that he was a member of the First Methodist Church choir when he and his family lived in Atlanta. I can clearly recall the innumerable occasions when my little brother and I accompanied my grandmother and grandfather, Nan and Pop, downtown to the church on Wednesday nights for choir practice. Since, at the ages of four and six respectively, my brother Douglas and I were not particularly good at sitting still for several hours, Nan often took us across the street and around the corner from the church to a small city park where she could read and watch us as we ran and played during Pop's choir practice.

These outings were some of our favorite times during the years in Atlanta in the 1950s. The tiny city park had nothing much more than a small area of grass and trees at the end of a city block. Except for one feature—a huge water fountain with a shallow pool around it—there was nothing distinctive, especially for small children. In effect, the fountain was the park. The diameter of the pool was probably about sixteen feet or so, as I recall it now. It seemed immense, with a fountain that shot water like a geyser high into the air. Sometimes the geyser grew incrementally to its full height, moving a few feet at a time until it reached its peak; other times it shot to its full height all at once. The fountain's center was unique. Surrounding the fountain base was a ring of underwater flood lights, each of which had a different-colored lens covering. The pastel hues of red, blue, yellow, green, and purple alternately shined on the fountain, producing the most exquisite rainbows to be found in any landscape. Douglas and I ran around the fountain squealing with delight whenever the fountain came to its full height and the colored lights draped the geyser with their various rainbow robes. Sometimes the colors were of one hue; other times the lights flashed on and off dramatically like a slow strobe. Sometimes only one color infused the fountain, and other times several flashed on at the same time, showing different colors on different sides of the geyser. This was a magical place for my brother and me. We imagined gnomes, elves, faeries, and other elemental spirits cavorting with us around this enchanting place. We always considered it extra special when Nan took us to the colored fountain.

Living in close proximity to our grandparents was always thrilling for my brother and me. We spent many pleasant hours in the company of our Nan and Pop. On many occasions, Nan took Douglas and me shopping downtown. Sometimes we persuaded Nan to detour intentionally so we could at least ride by to see the colored fountain, and that was thrill enough, even if we couldn't get out and race around it or feel the splash of its misty cloak draping us with its sparkling magic. Just to see the colored fountain was excitement to us.

One particular excursion downtown, however, will remain pasted into my memory forever. Nan had taken Douglas and me to Rich's Department Store on Peachtree Street. Actually, this store spanned Peachtree Street, half on one side of the street and half on the other side of the street, connected by a glass-walled walkway one or two stories up from the street. We loved going across that walkway, too, for it was unique in its day and special for little children to peer over at the traffic and pedestrians below. At one end of the walkway was Rich's luncheon counter where we occasionally had lunch with Nan.

Nan always had a chicken salad sandwich, I remember, and Douglas and I sneered at each other privately whenever she ordered it because we thought such sandwiches to be rather repugnant. We ordered the more prestigious grilled cheese or peanut butter and jelly, something which didn't contain such a cryptic mixture of ingredients. Like many children, at mealtimes we religiously and painstakingly segregated the vegetables on our dinner plates from each other and certainly from our meats, lest in touching each other they became tainted. So, while dining out, we never jeopardized our digestive purity by ordering something which contained such a mishmash of foods as chicken salad did. This practice was especially notable at home whenever we were served vegetables which we did not like. Asparagus, for example, made me retch. I never ate that stuff, although I always had to try at least a spoonful of whatever it was that I didn't like, or I could have no dessert. It was always a hideous color, that asparagus, sort of an olive drab. It smelled "pukey," and imbued every other morsel on my plate with its own particularly disgusting taste if it so much as brushed up against other foods. Were it not for the possibility of being considered a baby, I would have used a plate with those divided sections, so as to keep the foods on my plate in their proper neighborhoods. I may have been finicky, but I had a philosophy to support it. Tainted foods were unhealthy. To have asparagus brush against my applesauce, for example, created a major trauma, for I loved applesauce, but I could not, would not, eat it if it had become tainted with asparagus residue. It might as well have been sprayed with some poison; it could not have been more odious.

At Rich's then, Nan guided us to the waiting area in front of the lunch counter. There was always a wait at lunchtime at Rich's lunch counter. Being too young to appreciate sitting still and waiting, I spotted an intriguing water fountain and wished to investigate its contents and to grab a sip of that cold, familiar water before lunch. I can still hear the humming refrigeration unit contained in the bottom of the fountain. Before I pressed the button, I stood anticipating the chilled liquid rising from the spout to numb my lips and mouth before it trickled down my throat. Then, I reached out in almost giddy excitement to press the button. But, before I could touch the button, Nan grabbed me from behind and dragged me away, across the mezzanine to the waiting benches. Douglas sat there, appearing angelic as usual, waiting to see what I was about to be punished for and secretly hoping he wouldn't laugh out loud when I got whatever it was I apparently deserved. But, to his disappointment, I wasn't punished, at least not that time. Nan simply sat me down and talked with me about something which Douglas didn't understand and only half heard. His annoyance at my lack of physical punishment was obvious when he began to squirm in his seat from pretending to be satisfied with, and appreciative of, the waiting. He was always a good actor. What Nan said to me produced a shocked dismay and a curious confusion.

She said, "You went to the wrong fountain, Honey."

"No, I didn't, Nan," I corrected.

"Oh, but you did," she replied. "That fountain is not for us to use. See the sign above it?"

I looked again at the sign; it said, "Colored."

"Yes," I said with tears filling my eyes, "I saw that sign and that's why I went to that fountain. I wanted to see and taste the colored water, just like in the colored fountain."

She said, "That fountain is for the colored folks to use. We don't drink from that fountain."

When she released her hold on me, I rushed up to that very fountain and pushed the button. The look on my face, Nan said, she would never forget. That look registered disillusionment, distrust, and disappointment all at once. The water was, of course, clear liquid; it was not the colors of the rainbow and it would not taste different from the water in the fountain which had the sign over it saying "White." I didn't understand. It was so unfair.

"Why," I asked, "if the water is the same clear water in both fountains, are there two fountains, Nan?"

She said, "Because, Honey, that's the way it is."

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Regular As Rain

Cynthia Stewart

I start watching for you as soon as the bus approaches your house
with its shady, swept yard, its wisteria wound, stocky oak and
its two-story farmhouse, peeling yellowed paint.
No sign of a wife, just you alone working in your garden
or busting up firewood in a regularly diminishing pile.
I imagine your droopy, red-dirt dusted overalls would smell
of sweat and denim like Granddaddy's when I crawl up in his lap
after school with my snack—a cold biscuit filled with a scoop of sugar.

You're a black man, "colored," we said then, skin well-milked cocoa,
a salt and pepper, Uncle Remus beard and frizzy white hair, well-trimmed.

I'm a white girl, a second grader whose swish of long, black ponytail is
bound in a rubber band wound so tightly my eyelids are slanted.

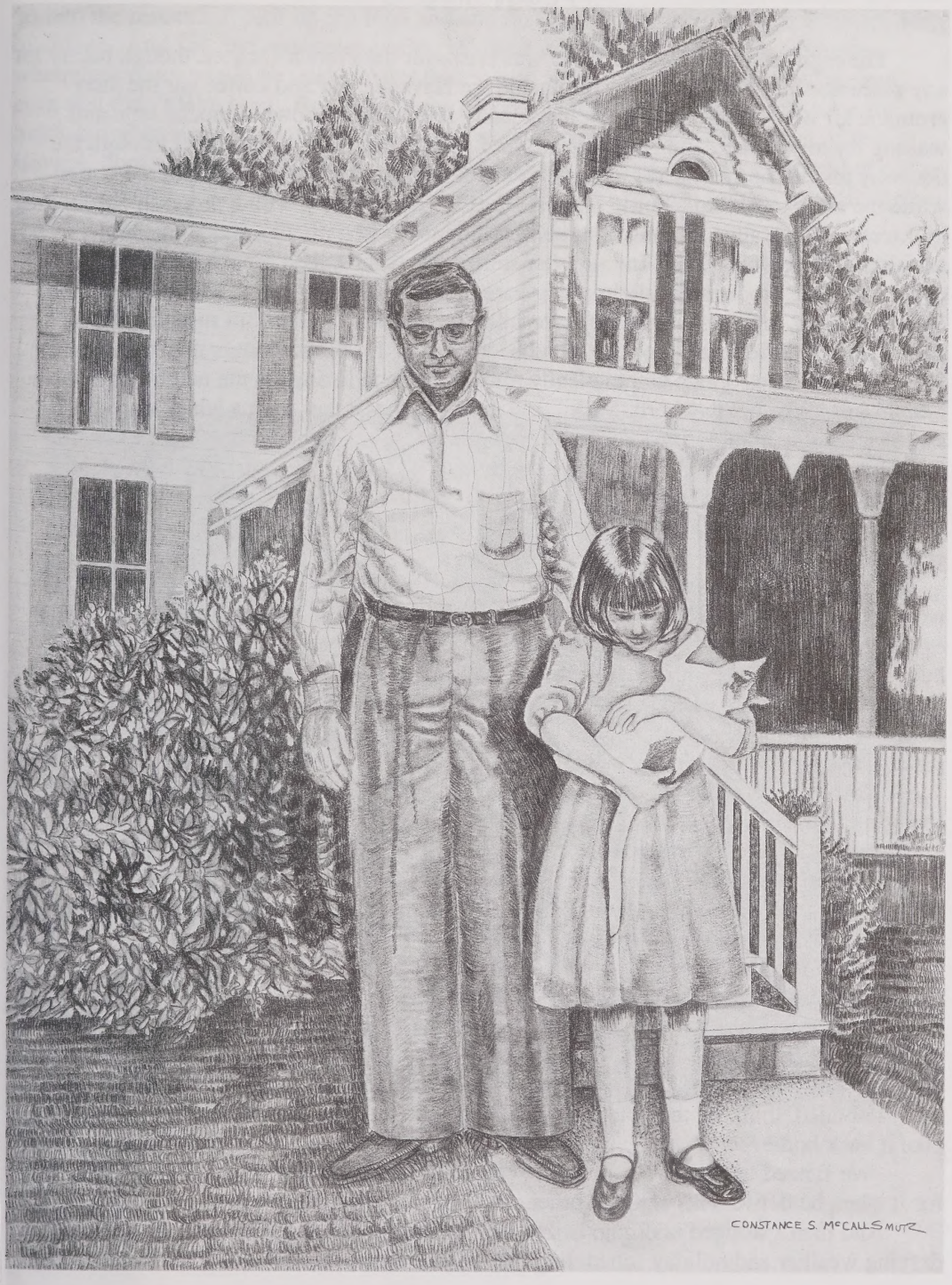
I'm sitting at the front of the bus near the driver like Mama told me to
after the boys at the back teased me to tears,
calling me China Eyes and pulling my ponytail.

Trimmed, raven bangs across my forehead are straight as the wrinkles
that delineate my troubled thoughts as we approach your house.
You are hoeing your late summer garden,
cutting manure into crumbles of Carolina clay,
minding your own business like Mama says more people ought to.

The boys at the back stampede to your side of the bus,
thrusting hands out the windows,
pumping raised middle fingers to the rhythm of
NIG-GER-NIG-GER-NIG-GER
'til you're out of sight.

I wonder what you think, eyes staring down the row.
Do you keep hoeing, viewing their hatred as being as natural,
as recurrent as the weeds that threaten your greens?
Or do you switch to splitting wood?

Forty years later I still remember you, coming into view—
a man I never knew or spoke to,
a man who, each day, regular as rain, could have set his clock
to the tauntings of school children with lessons to learn.



Drawing by Constance M. Smutz

Survival in the French Quarter

Peggy Higgins

The night before New Year's Eve was crisp, for the French Quarter, though balmy for any place north of New Orleans. But inside the Havana cigar and coffee bar the hazy aromatic air was as warm as Fidel's homeland. Drinking my bowl of mocha latte and waiting for my dinner companions to arrive, I noticed the two women stroll through the doorway and make themselves at home at the table nearest the bar. One ordered coffee while the other extracted a bottle of wine from her purse, along with a professional-looking corkscrew. The waiter, without comment, brought two stemmed glasses to the table, in addition to the coffee. The wine supplier smiled her thanks, then dipped into her bag again, this time producing a slightly dog-eared restaurant menu which she and her friend both examined, making animated conversation all the while. A distant rumbling from about waist level reminded me that I had been waiting for dinner longer than usual, so I found my own eyes drawn automatically toward the food listings at the neighboring table. I could just make out the word "sushi" and reflected that it had been a while since I had sampled some of those edible works of art, since my usual dinner partner spoke disdainfully about the idea of eating anything that resembled bait. The woman with the wine caught my eye, flashed a gap-toothed grin, and asked if I'd like to see the menu, too.

"We're going to have it delivered here," she said. "Would you like to order some with us?"

I thanked her for her offer, but explained my own eating schedule which probably wouldn't (I hoped) allow time for delivered appetizers. She nodded, grinned again, then extracted a cellular phone from a pocket on the side of her bag and began pushing the buttons to connect her with the food supply. While she talked, my curiosity got the better of my manners, and I asked her friend why they came to one eatery only to order food delivered from another, especially since I noticed from the address on the menu that the sushi bar was only a few blocks away.

"Oh, it got too cold to walk any farther and we didn't want to walk back to her (pointing to the one on the phone) apartment either," explained the other woman.

"So you live here in New Orleans?"

"Fifteen years," the first woman said, as she hung up the phone. "I forgot this was a holiday weekend. They're too busy to deliver but we can get an order to go," she added, this directed to her friend and would-be dining companion.

Before I could commiserate with them about having to either brave the chill and walk to their restaurant of choice, hail a cab, or simply choose another place to eat within closer range, they were already working out their next move, and it didn't have anything to do with settling for less.

"If they still do take-out, we can call a cab," said one.

I nodded, thinking they planned to take the cab themselves, pick up the food, then take it back home.

"We'll need to find out if the driver can go in to pick up the food and then charge us for it when he delivers it," said the other.

And then I stopped nodding, frozen into immobility by the cold logic of a plan, defying weather and holiday scheduling, which still allowed them to sit in warm comfort,

sip their wine, along with a coffee or two, and then eat Japanese food, all in a place that actually only offered two of the four items on that list—warmth and coffee.

A quick confirmation call to a local cab company told them that, yes, the driver could go into the restaurant, pick up the food and add that cost to the cab fare, plus a service fee, of course. And yes, the restaurant could give them a firm time—within five minutes—when their order would be ready. After that, it was all over except for the waiting, and even that didn't take long. By the time my friends showed up, there was only time for quick introductions all around before the cab pulled up at the sidewalk in front of the Havana, honked his horn, and exchanged a large paper bag full of sushi for a wad of cash.

As we left, I waved to the successful strategists, who, in turn, saluted me with their bamboo chopsticks, their mouths already busy chewing.

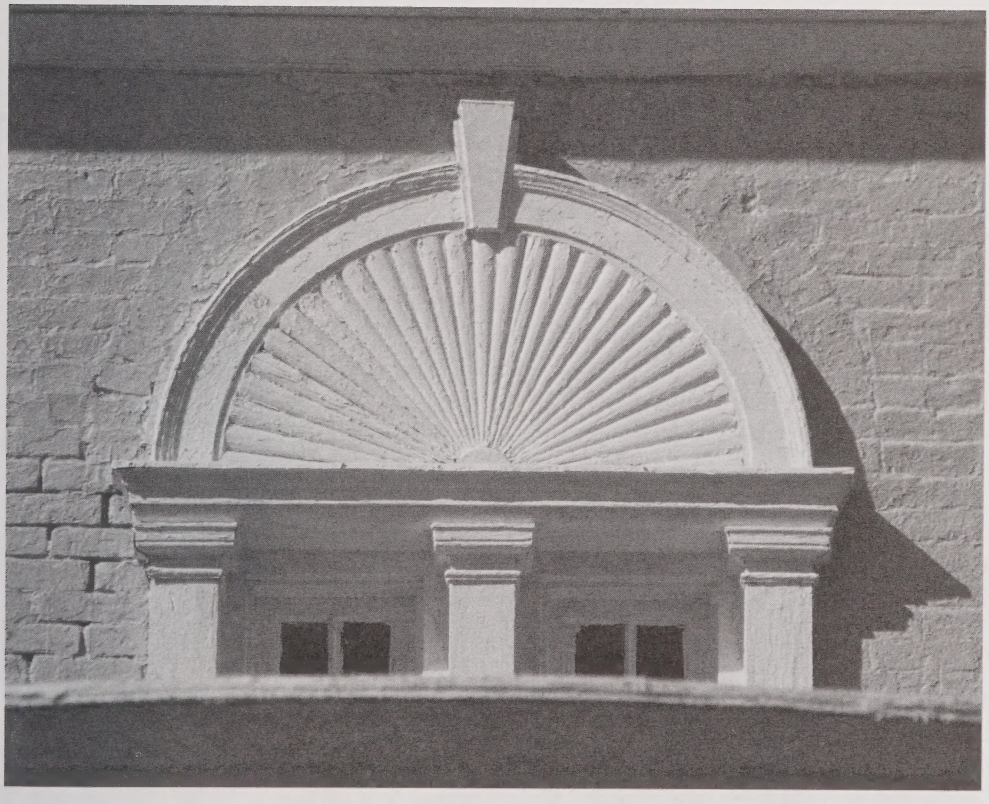


Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Daybreak over the Blue Ridge

Nancy Dillingham

There is no softness here
save fog's blue hand
as it settles over land
quiet as church
and twice as literal

There is no softness here
One's mettle must be tested
against the harsh line
of oncoming day
that is reality

There is no softness here
no subtleness
just the hard misfortune of time
that lifts one out of dreaming
and into light

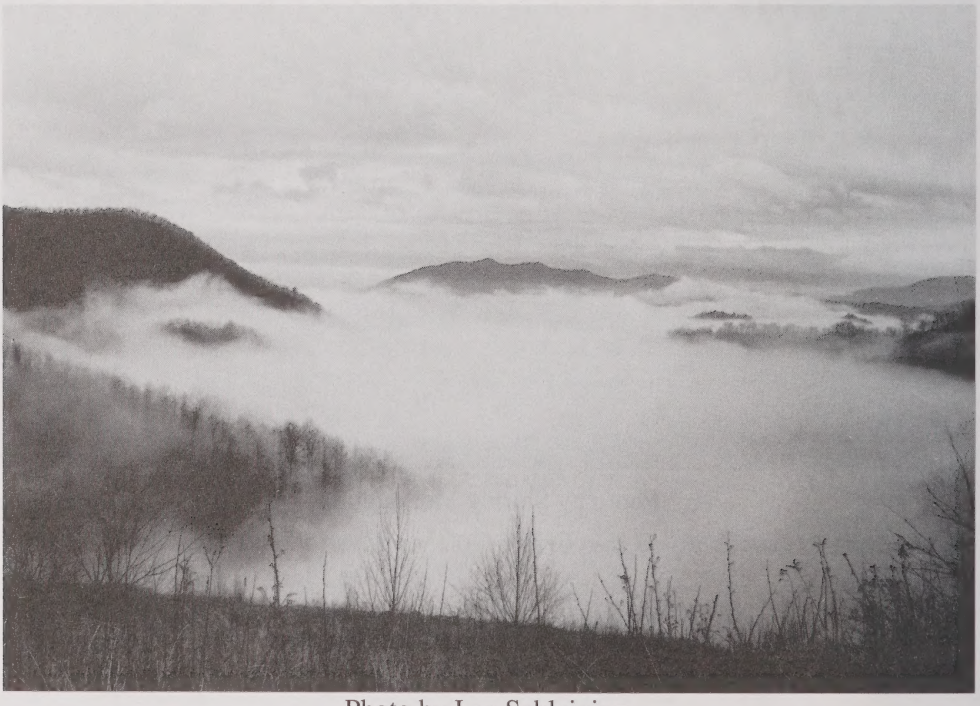
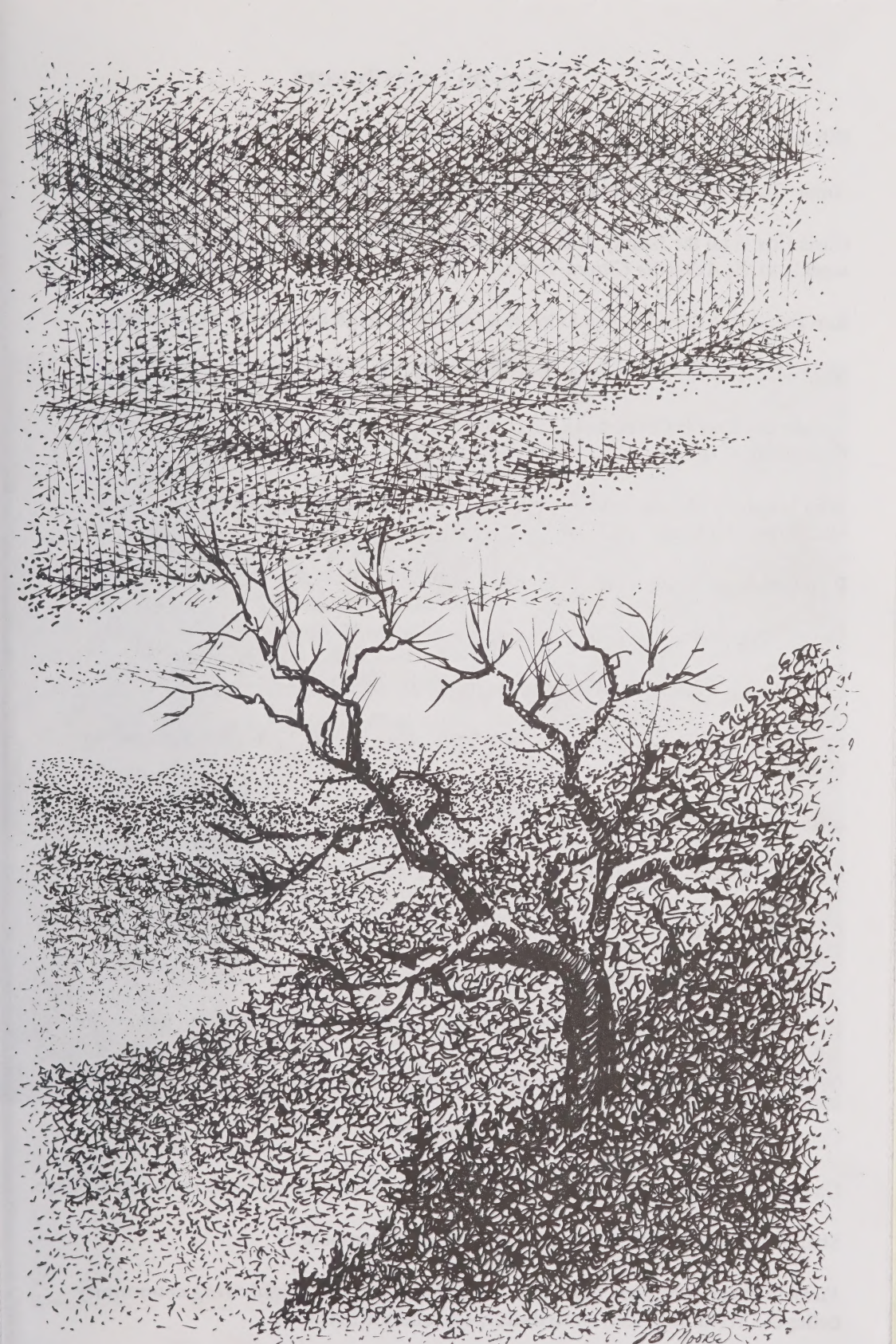


Photo by Lee Schleining



Drawing by Sandra Brugh Moore

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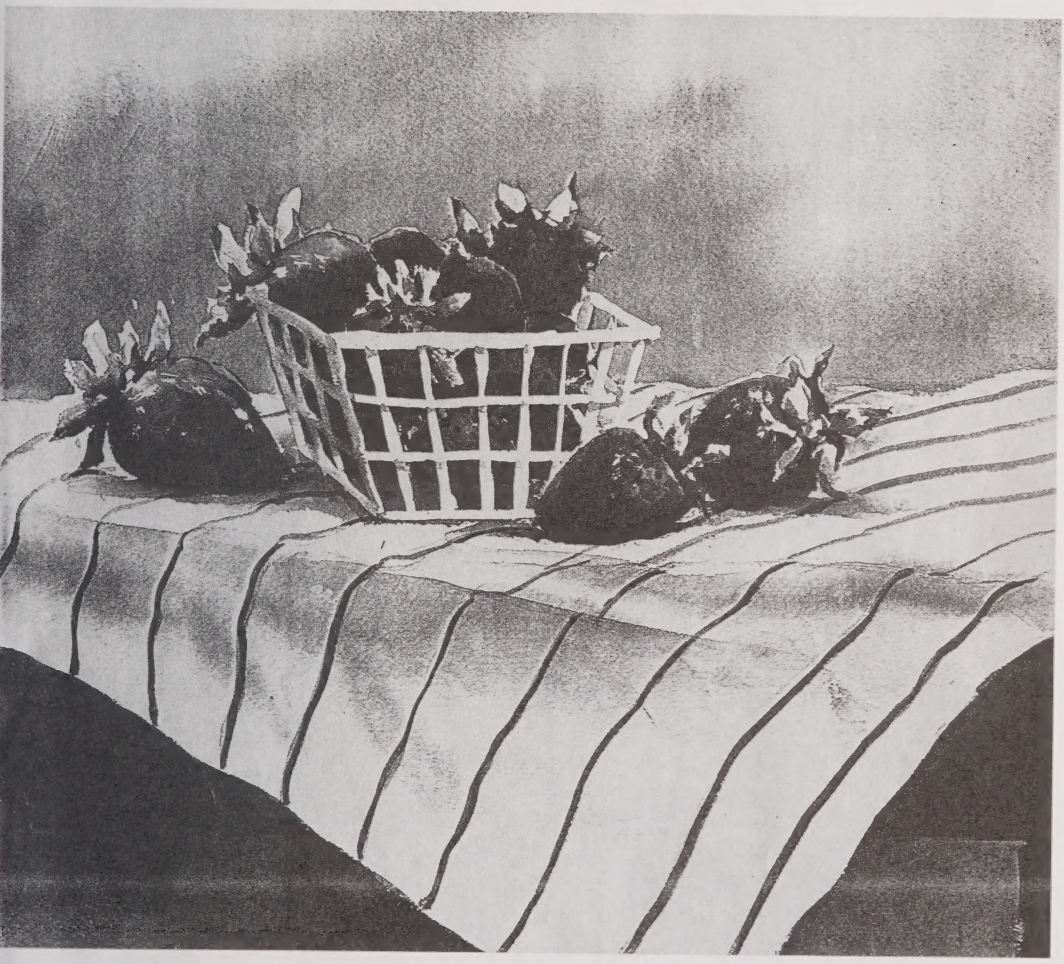

Watercolor by Sandra Brugh Moore

Watercolor by Annie Cicale

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